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VARIETIES OF PILGRIMAGE EXPERIENCE:  
RELIGIOUS JOURNEYING IN CENTRAL KERALA

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## Abstract

The thesis concerns pilgrimages undertaken by members of both Christian and Hindu communities in Central Kerala, especially in the Ernakulam area. "Community pilgrimages" undertaken by Syrian Orthodox ("Jacobite") Christians are discussed in detail. These are shown to be occasions for expressing the identity and interests of Jacobites in the context of a long-running dispute which has divided Orthodox Christians in Kerala. For Jacobites, pilgrimage makes a statement about loyalty to their Patriarch and about rights of access to disputed sites. These occasions are distinguished from other pilgrimages, especially one to a famous Catholic site, which maintain broad, cross-community appeal. Parallel examples of Hindu pilgrimages of both types are described. In addition, the thesis emphasises the value of attending to experiential aspects of the pilgrimage journey. Descriptions of the pilgrimages, together with comments on the general character of experience for participants, are supplemented by personal accounts provided by individual pilgrims. A phenomenological approach is taken in order to understand the themes which emerge, in particular processes of learning and change undergone by participants.

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## Preface

Only the road and the dawn, the sun, the wind, and the rain,  
And the watch fire under stars, and sleep, and the road again.

John Masefield: *The Seekers*.

This is a discussion of journeying. The middle portion of the work, chapters four to six, provides ethnographic descriptions of pilgrimage journeys in Kerala. Before that, some thorough consideration of the social, geographical and, also, theoretical background to the ethnography is provided. In the last two chapters, specific themes concerning pilgrimage experience are taken up and explored in detail. It is helpful, at the outset, to provide a brief outline of the subject-matter of the chapters to guide the reader on his or her path through the text.

Chapter one reviews writing in the anthropology of pilgrimage up to the present. It may, perhaps, seem overdetailed to those not previously acquainted with the delights of pilgrimage studies. However, both theory and methodology within the field have shown increasing sophistication in recent years and, for this reason, a thorough overview is helpful.

Chapter two presents the historical background within Kerala. Regrettably, there is space for only the briefest discussion of Kerala history before the twentieth century. However, it is the emergence of the "New Kerala", and the roles of religious movements and political activism within this, which is central. Attention is given to the impact of these phenomena on pilgrimage practice.

Chapter three describes the setting, the area in and around Ernakulam, within which the fieldwork was based. It then describes principal characteristics of the communities living there, in particular those which featured prominently in the research, especially "Jacobite" Christians.

Chapters four to six present the ethnographic descriptions of particular pilgrimages, exploring similarities and differences across different Christian denominations and within both Christian and Hindu traditions. These chapters aim to convey what it is like to do the pilgrimages. However, individual pilgrims are encountered only fleetingly; they are introduced properly in chapter seven.

In chapters seven and eight, the experiential aspects of pilgrimage, both in general and for particular participants, are considered. Chapter eight develops these themes, attempting to reach a phenomenological understanding. It is, consequently, the most theoretically dense chapter of the thesis. It is divided, uniquely, into sub-sections and sub-sub-sections. This full discussion of the issues seems to me justified because

they are matters which have been relatively underexplored in the anthropology of pilgrimage hitherto.

The thesis finishes with a statement of conclusions and consideration of further issues which remain. To assist the reader, brief summaries have been included at the end of each chapter; these can function as signposts indicating both the route travelled and the way ahead.

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### **Note on Transliteration**

I am not convinced that there is any completely satisfactory solution to the problem of transliterating Malayalam. This is especially the case when, as in the present text, some words derive from Syriac which are themselves rendered, not always consistently, into Malayalam. There are problems in representing spoken Malayalam since it frequently differs from the written form. In addition, various spellings of place names are encountered. I have aimed to be clear and consistent but without rigorously following one system. Instead, I have used transliterated forms which seem to me to correspond with those most often found in Kerala itself, for example in English language newspapers, and, where doubt remains because of inconsistency here, I have taken into account usage in academic literature - e.g. Izhava, Bawa, Ayyappan. Place names are in Anglicised form, though it should be acknowledged that some in Kerala (Keralam!) would prefer more "authentically" Malayali spellings. Diacritics have not been used.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF PILGRIMAGE: TOWARDS A TWO PRONGED-ATTACK

From the earliest stages of contemplating the present study, I held the view that certain particular approaches to the study of pilgrimage might provide valuable insight into this almost universal cultural phenomenon which had hitherto been underexplored. In an earlier dissertation on pilgrimage within South Asia (Gath 1992) I argued that careful attention to both sociological and psychological issues would be fruitful. Within the former I included issues relating to such matters as social relations, group dynamics, political and community rivalries. The latter included the personal concerns of individual pilgrims, their experiences and motivations, hopes, fears and opinions. In order to explain the significance of this dual emphasis, it is helpful to consider various approaches to the anthropology of pilgrimage which have been developed up until now, specifying the issues which researchers have considered to be the important themes in the field.

Both scholarly and popular literature on pilgrimage has been produced at an increasing rate in recent years. Anthropology has made a notable contribution to this. This probably reflects a recognition of the fact that it was comparatively neglected in previous years. In addition, however, this growing interest reflects the influence of one particular writer, Victor Turner. In a number of seminal studies on pilgrimage (Turner 1973, 1974; Turner and Turner 1978) he stimulated considerable interest in the topic amongst fellow anthropologists. His ideas encouraged debate and further research; subsequent critical studies have initiated debates of their own.

Before the 1970s, the study of pilgrimage might have been considered problematic for anthropologists. Pilgrimage involves, frequently, large numbers of people drawn from a large area. They participate in a relatively transient phenomenon before dispersing to their various places of origin. Are such occasions amenable to study by the same techniques as anthropologists use for villages and other small-scale communities which, after all, stay in one place and for which a gradual immersion into a long period of participant-observation is possible? Perhaps pilgrimages involve too many people in one place for too short a time. Perhaps there are too many variables to keep track of when studying the participants - their different home communities, different backgrounds, castes and religions, different mixes of 'higher' and 'folk' traditions. Whilst these are significant problems, they have seemed less daunting as anthropologists have shed their inhibitions and begun to study an ever-wider range of communities and social contexts.

Pilgrimage was a topic that anthropologists had to resolve to study. Within the world's major religions its significance remained as great as ever. Indeed, more and more people were going on pilgrimage, assisted by rapid developments in



transportation and tourism. Overcoming anxieties concerning methodological and theoretical problems has been necessary to allow anthropologists to comprehend an activity undertaken by millions of men and women across many different traditions. As D K Samanta has said for Hinduism (Samanta 1985: 45):

For Hindus it is a life-time aspiration to go on pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage is essential for worldly achievement as well as achievement in the other world - an idea prevalent in sacred literature. To understand Indian civilisation the institution of pilgrimage has to be studied.

In the current year (1997) in Britain, there have been pilgrimages organized to mark the 1400th anniversaries of both the arrival of St Augustine at Canterbury and the death of St Columba at Iona. There has also been one to mark the one hundredth anniversary of modern pilgrimage to Walsingham. And this is despite the predominance of the Protestant tradition in Britain. International pilgrimages, to such destinations as Jerusalem, Mecca and Bodh Gaya continue to expand. Pilgrimage seems to be a genuinely popular form of religious practice, appealing to people of many backgrounds and points of view. It appears that they derive satisfaction from the undertaking in a way which deserves to be studied directly, and not simply treated as an epiphenomenon arising from established doctrines or textual traditions. Some, though perhaps not all, pilgrims seem to undergo a significant experience as a result of undertaking their journey - they are in some way affected by it. These are processes in which the anthropologist can take an interest by talking to pilgrims and, as far as possible, by participating as a pilgrim. The more detached styles of observation which might be employed for studying day to day religious worship in a community are likely to be less illuminating in the context of pilgrimage. Full participation together with observation and follow-up discussions are all important.

Pilgrimage is a diverse and changing phenomenon. For this reason, we need, always, to be specific about what types of pilgrimage, and indeed what particular aspects, we are considering at any particular time. Over-generalised theorising which ignores the variety of situations covered by the term "pilgrimage" should be avoided. At the same time, there can be an appreciation of the wide range of other issues of anthropological interest to which it can be related. Topics such as healing, landscape, the interpretation of history, inter-community and inter-caste relations are

all prominent within anthropology and frequently have to be addressed in studying pilgrimage.

The issue of healing is the most prominent topic within the broader theme of the "rewards" of pilgrimage. Many pilgrims clearly hope that their journeys will improve their lives, often in quite practical ways. An anthropological investigation of pilgrimage can look at the diverse reasons people have for undertaking it; it can discern the problems, anxieties as well as the hopes that drive people onto the pilgrim's way. Studying pilgrimage can, therefore, be almost like peering at a barometer which provides a clue about prevailing social pressures with the resultant strains and personal problems which trouble people. We will explore this theme in the later part of the work.

Pilgrimage, we noted, is a complex and diverse phenomenon. In some forms it bears a resemblance to other phenomena which are not typically classified as pilgrimages. These include journeys which people undertake to visit sites associated with deceased cultural heroes such as royalty, war combatants or pop stars. In addition, touristic or educational visits to sacred and historic locations such as Stonehenge or Uluru (Ayer's Rock), gatherings at Glastonbury or Goa, and travels to remote places for retreat or simply for the sake of journeying, can all be considered to be modern, "secularised" forms of pilgrimage. Whilst many of these can be more conventionally labelled as "tourism", they can be said to contain elements of "implicit religion", as argued by Reader (1993:16-17). That is to say, such journeys may have a partially spiritual aspect, a striving to establish contact with a deceased hero or a desire for enhanced encounters with fellow enthusiasts. In a similar vein, I argue that in Kerala there has been some overlap and mutual influence between the phenomena of political marches, on the one hand, and pilgrimage journeys on the other [c.f. Werbner (1989) on comparisons between ritual passages and sacred journeys]. This issue is explored in Chapter two and recurs subsequently in the ethnographic descriptions.

### The Sociological Approaches

Turner's writings on pilgrimage generated considerable interest because they seemed to relate religious journeys to broad themes in anthropology; connections were made with many other social processes. Drawing upon his work amongst the Ndembu of Zambia, Turner adapted the ideas of Van Gennep on rites of passage (1908: English edition 1960). He argued that many rituals and other social phenomena incorporate "liminal" phases. Instead of the prevalent structure - hierarchy, division and rigid

imposition of roles - which characterises mundane society, the liminal periods, for example during initiation rites, display "anti-structure" according to Turner. The characteristics of anti-structure are egalitarian social bonding, which possesses an immediacy and intensity of a kind seldom possible otherwise. There is a rejection of the rigidity of the norms and institutions of structured everyday society, although this is likely to be temporary. The states of enhanced social bonding, which are likely to emerge in liminal periods and permit direct, spontaneous relationships within groups, were referred to as occurrences of "communitas" by Turner.

Communitas, according to Turner, can occur in many contexts in different societies. The "miracle of Dunkirk" (Turner 1974:250), rock music (ibid:262), orders of mendicant friars (ibid:244) and pilgrimages (ibid:203-8) all display communitas, he argued. There is an intense and egalitarian social interaction which contrasts with standard social conduct. In some cases, participants subjectively experience a powerful and direct sense of encounter, an enhanced state which Turner calls "existential communitas" (ibid: 169). In other cases, there is an intention or urge towards the establishment of ideal social relations which is displayed in the form of exhortation or the establishment of rules, although actual practice may often fall short of the ideal. Turner called this "normative communitas". He suggested that, for pilgrimage, "while the total situation fosters the emergence of existential communitas, it is normative communitas that constitutes the characteristic social bond among pilgrims and between pilgrims and those who offer them help and hospitality on their holy journey" (ibid:169-70). This is an important distinction which should not be overlooked in evaluating Turner's ideas.

The broad generality of Turner's conjectures could give the impression that his principal concepts possess an elasticity which might easily render them vacuous. Perhaps they could be made to fit so many situations that "communitas" or its absence would prove as hard to pin down as "love" or "faith". Nonetheless, if we are to explore the overlap between pilgrimage and parallel social phenomena then we should welcome the possibility of using Turner's ideas to establish connections with a wide range of situations. And a degree of vagueness in his key concept need not be threatening if we strive to be precise about the meaning of each of the different possible applications of the term "communitas". In grappling with the topic of pilgrimage - not to mention all the multiple overlapping phenomena - we are dealing with an activity which can assume such diverse forms that we should expect that whilst at times one form of the communitas concept may be useful at other times it

may seem quite irrelevant. Acknowledging this should help us to give Turner's work sympathetic but critical consideration.

The most notable post-Turnerian perspective on pilgrimage has emerged from recent criticisms of his work which seemed necessary in order to make sense of new ethnographic material. This has been expounded in a collection of papers edited by John Eade and Michael Sallnow (1991) and suggested by work of Sallnow (1981, 1987), Van der Veer (1984, 1988), Bowman (1985) and others. At first sight, it seems to advance a view diametrically opposed to that of Turner. It draws attention to the fact that pilgrim centres are often surrounded by controversy, with dissent and rivalry apparent as different groups strive to advance their interests. They may be struggling to gain control of holy sites, propagate some political agenda or impose their own conceptions of appropriate doctrine and practice. This perspective can be referred to as the "competing discourse" approach.

Competing discourse theorists point to the fact that pilgrimage can readily become a vehicle for propagating a particular point of view. The experiences of pilgrims can, perhaps, be manipulated to encourage their support for a particular cause, or else the pilgrimage can act as a means of bringing together those who already share some commitment. Alternatively, participants can be affected by conflicts and disputes at places they visit even though they are otherwise uninvolved. In some cases, perhaps, pilgrimage can produce tensions amongst participants due to mismanagement, fatigue or petty rivalry which otherwise might not have arisen. It is as easy to think of reasons for pilgrimage becoming characterised by competition and dispute as it is to imagine conditions for the emergence of Turnerian *communitas*. As we will see, there is plenty of ethnographic evidence to support speculation along these lines.

It is worth pointing out, however, that the *communitas*-oriented perspective and the competing discourse approach are not necessarily incompatible. In principle, there is no reason why one could not find enhanced social bonding within a pilgrimage party travelling to some destination, but bitter disputes raging at the site itself between those who have some kind of occupational or economic stake in the proceedings there. This is a significant point which draws our attention to two considerations. First, a number of different components within the general phenomenon of pilgrimage need to be carefully distinguished. For example, "professionals" involved in pilgrimage - priests, guides, traders - are clearly separate from pilgrims, with different interests and characteristics. Likewise peak times for performance of pilgrimage, holy days and official occasions, are clearly different from the quiet times when there are infrequent visits. And, especially, the process of journeying can

be quite different from the time passed at the destination itself. Pilgrimage involves all of these although any particular study is likely, of course, to concentrate on only one or two. We will see this in particular ethnographies shortly.

The second consideration is that, given the possibility of harmony in some parts of the pilgrimage process and discord in others, it is preferable to study more than one pilgrimage tradition in a given area if one wishes to judge the prevalence of these types of situation at a fairly broad level. If just one site is studied, it might appear that there is endless dispute and struggle for control, but this could actually reflect the fact that it is a particularly lucrative or historic location - elsewhere such problems might be avoided. Similarly, some pilgrimage parties may be far more likely to display social bonding than others, depending on the manner of their organisation, or the leading personalities. Obtaining an overview of the variety of pilgrimages which occur in a particular area helps to highlight their prevailing characteristics. This is a major concern of the present study.

Making a clear distinction between the journey, on the one hand, and conduct at the site/destination on the other, is critical. Pilgrimages for which the journey is of fundamental symbolic and experiential significance will display quite different characteristics from those for which it is not emphasized and only the proceedings at the destination are important. In the present study, the pilgrimages all involve journeys which are an integral part of the whole process; how you get to the destination is as significant as what you do when you are there. As we shall see, in the present study it will be appropriate to formulate a further subdivision for these pilgrimages. Any generalisation about pilgrimage which does not take account of these sorts of basic distinction, whether endorsing a Turnerian or competing discourse point of view, should be regarded with scepticism.

Both the Turnerian and competing discourse perspectives can be said to be broadly "sociological". They are concerned with broad patterns of social relations, interactions within and between groups or communities. It is supposed that individuals are affected by general attributes of a social whole, whether this is, say, the politically charged assertion that Ayodhya should commemorate a bygone era of glorious Hindu rule, or a gentle sense of camaraderie experienced amongst groups on foot to Santiago. However, in my own study of pilgrimage, whilst fully endorsing the need for sociological perspectives, I have taken the view that greater attention should be paid to individual pilgrims - their hopes and joys, fears and times of suffering. Pilgrimage is undertaken, in part, because it is a powerful experience for participants. In addition, it holds out the promise of assistance with problems in life

and the possibility of strengthening religious convictions. These are matters which should be investigated.

#### Personal and Psychological Issues - Second of the Two Prongs.

Alan Morinis, in a useful introduction to a volume which he edited called "Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage" (1992), distinguished various aspects of pilgrimage which deserve attention. He drew attention to the significance of both the journey and the "goal" - a point consistent with our distinction between journey and destination. In addition, he emphasized the need to attend to the pilgrims themselves by saying that the "anthropology of pilgrimage has given too little attention to the personal side of pilgrimage, of which motives are one aspect" (Morinis 1992:20). As well as motives there is experience. Morinis says "it is experience that counts .....It is valid to conceptualize pilgrimages as cultural channels along which individuals pass, carrying out actions (often specified) in pursuit of predictable experiences ..... Experiences can affect psychological and physical aspects of pilgrims' lives, working impact on health, well-being, and spiritual life" (ibid:21). In addition, Morinis points out that different "planes" can be distinguished, analytically, which impinge on pilgrimage. He mentions the "ego", "cultural", "social" and "physical" planes which comprise the attributes conferred on pilgrimage by individuals, cultural themes, social groups and physical locations respectively. The "ego" plane, including personal and psychological aspects of pilgrimage, has tended to be neglected in the literature.

James Preston (1992) has provided a chapter discussing methodological issues in "Sacred Journeys". He points out the relevance of various different "dimensions" of pilgrimage which he calls the geographical, historical, socio-cultural, economic and religious. Particularly notable for the present context is his inclusion of a psychological dimension. He asks, in a manner similar to Morinis, "what motivates people to undertake sacred journeys? How does the pilgrimage change people psychologically? What role do perceived salvation, suffering and penance play in the pilgrimage process?" It is clear that a number of writers have seen the need for greater attention to an exploration of personal and psychological issues - the experiences and motives of pilgrims and what they say about them. Others include Barbara Aziz (1987) and Ian Reader (1993:237-244).

In his introduction to "Sacred Journeys", Morinis credits Turner with having helped the emergence of a "two-pronged approach" which the investigation of pilgrimage requires by realising that "understanding of pilgrims and their pilgrimage ....demands

that social perspectives be supplemented by an appreciation for the direct experiences had by pilgrims". I wholeheartedly endorse the call for a two-pronged approach. However, it seems to me that Turner's conception of pilgrimage experience is still too closely tied to a conception of emergent attributes of social wholes. *Communitas* is a general affective states which is supposed to carry individuals along with it. This is the reason for labelling both the Turnerian and competing discourse approaches "sociological". For inspiration to guide a psychological approach attending to the specific qualities of the pilgrims' experiences, their needs and motives, which may differ from person to person, we need to look elsewhere.

A possible candidate for the role of theorist for psychological aspects of pilgrimage is Obeyesekere, who has been influenced by both Weber and Freud. In his work on religious cults in Sri Lanka, and particularly on the pilgrimage to Kataragama (1977, 1978, 1981), Obeyesekere is thoroughly psychological in his approach. He aims to explore how far psychodynamic interpretations will enhance his understanding both of general trends in Sri Lankan pilgrimage practice and, also, of the situations of individual pilgrims, who are described in specific case studies. In exploring the life-problems of these individual pilgrims, as well as broad social strains, Obeyesekere could be said to be using his investigation of pilgrimage as a sort of social barometer, in the manner suggested earlier.

The Kataragama pilgrimage is notable for the fact that worship at the site was originally an almost exclusive concern of Tamil Hindus. In their veneration of the deity Skanda at his forest shrine, Tamil devotees practised various rites of self-mortification such as hanging from hooks embedded in the flesh or walking over hot coals. Whilst such practices are characteristic of some cults within Tamil Hinduism, they contrast markedly with the traditional style of orthodox Buddhism which had exerted a strong influence on the Sinhalese majority in Sri Lanka. (The fact that this social background has been changing is considered by Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). However, Sinhalese pilgrims gradually became involved in more expressive forms of worship, practising *bhakti* devotionism with vigorous dancing and, sometimes, displays of ecstatic emotionalism. Some perform fire walking and hanging from hooks. Whilst more restrained behaviour remains typical of many of the Sinhala visitors to the site, there does seem to have been a change. The reasons for this are one of the key themes which Obeyesekere has attempted to address.

Obeyesekere's writings explore a number of topics of a psychological nature. He conjectures that increasing individualism and growing emphasis upon self-assertion, mainly for the achievement of material success, have coincided with an untying of

social integration and a reduced esteem for traditional religious authority and belief. This is a situation which leads people to experiment with new forms of religious practice, particularly ones in which they can develop an increasingly rewarding relationship with a supernatural being. They thereby come to feel that the deity or saint can directly assist them with the problems of their modern lifestyle. This is a pattern which is apparent in many religious traditions but in this case there is an increasingly individualistic emphasis in which deity and devotee form a sort of "self-help" alliance, helping each other to help themselves. (The individual's evolving relationship with saint or deity is an issue which will be significant in the present work.)

Obeyesekere has also pointed to the possibility of strains in particular social relations, and the consequences which this might have for religious practice. The average age of men and women at marriage, especially amongst middle classes, has been increasing and this, it is argued, could lead to frustration and loneliness for many young people. The development of an intense relationship with a deity, especially one such as Skanda of Kataragama who is noted for his relationship with a mistress, Valli Amma, a forest spirit, could provide some psychological compensation. Similar relationships with deities might be developed by people who need to cope with grief at the loss of a loved one, or an unsatisfactory marriage or strained relationships with their parents. For some, an apparent ability to undergo divine possession could help to render a tendency to fits, disturbed sleep or general eccentricity, socially acceptable, even advantageous. Obeyesekere uses some unusually detailed case study material concerning committed religious devotees as the basis for his conjectures.

In some cases, Obeyesekere proposes psychoanalytical interpretations of the behaviour of his informants, postulating a symbolic significance of an emphatically Freudian kind. In fact, Obeyesekere maintains that many symbols have both a public and a private aspect. The latter is a particular, probably unconscious, meaning for an individual which can be discerned from the manner in which the symbol has acquired a distinctive resonance in their life. For example, a long dense mass of plaited hair, possessed by some female devotees is said to be a phallic symbol (Obeyesekere 1981:33-37), whilst temporary burial in a pit in the ground is postulated to be symbolic of burial in a tomb or a re-entry into the womb (ibid:135,150).

Whilst some of Obeyesekere's conjectures can be challenged, he has presented valuable case-study material, which is discussed in a thought-provoking manner. Unfortunately, few other studies have sought to investigate the problems which



motivate people to become participants in pilgrimage or the ways in which they may benefit from the process.

A study by Skultans (1987), of a temple in Maharashtra which is associated with the alleviation of mental illness, suggests that families are helped to maintain hope for the possibility of amelioration of their situation by transferring the problem onto a female care-giver in the family. She thereby becomes a sort of sacrificial substitute, adopting the affliction in the form of a regular tendency to enter trance. The care-giver becomes a victim herself - willingly according to women informants, almost inevitably according to some of the priests. In this way, the woman might divert anxiety and strain from other family members onto herself, almost as if the obligation to adopt a "sick role" is relinquished by one and shouldered by another. The sharing of the burden of problems within the family is an issue which we will explore when considering the motives of Kerala pilgrims.

R. L. Stirrat (1992) has emphasised the importance of relationships within families in a study of a healing centre in Sri Lanka. Pilgrims are attracted there by the powers of a charismatic Catholic priest who sometimes "discovers" them to be possessed by demons which must be exorcised. Stirrat points out that subjects have to learn how to be possessed, their behaviour must be "modified and controlled to approximate to ideas of how the possessed should behave" (ibid:105). Sometimes the individual's particular suffering is widened. For one woman it came to include "all those other incidents and experiences, not only her own but those of her family, which involved various degrees of suffering" (ibid:95).

Stirrat argues that the processes of possession and exorcism usually involve attempts by people within families to control others. This is usually parents attempting to impose their will on their children, especially females between 15 and 25 (ibid:108-9). In some cases, however, possession is not involved, instead visitors are enabled to see their suffering as a meritorious sacrifice, as Christ-like (ibid:116-21).

Another notable study is William Christian's account of devotionism and pilgrimage in a Spanish valley (Christian 1972). He explores the impact of broad cultural change on villagers' relationships with their saintly patrons, in particular the impact of more rationalistic theologies propagated by young priests which threaten to undermine the established, intimate relationships between saints and supplicants. Whilst these studies are suggestive, the fact remains that there are very few studies in which we meet pilgrims and gain any insight into their personal concerns.

The paucity of studies which consider pilgrimage from personal and psychological angles probably reflects, in part, methodological difficulties. Pilgrims move around - at least while performing pilgrimage - which can make it difficult to keep track of them and get to know them well enough to obtain significant personal information. However, in addition to this, a second reason for neglect of these issues seems to be a prejudice against psychological, especially psychoanalytical, approaches within anthropology. Whilst some of the distrust of psychodynamic theorising may be justified, I would argue that it is regrettable if this leads to an abandonment of the attempt to gather information on the experiences, motivations and life-concerns of pilgrims. We must get to know the pilgrims themselves. In my view, approaching these matters phenomenologically, in the spirit of Husserl, Jaspers, and especially, Merleau-Ponty, is a way of probing the details of experience and its significance. It can yield information which is vivid and meaningful and which can then be related to theoretical issues, as appropriate. In this way, we can explore personal aspects of the process but without too many psychological, or psychodynamic, assumptions. Exploring the possibilities inherent in a phenomenological approach to pilgrimage will be a major concern of the later part of this study (chapters seven and eight).

## **Theology, Symbol and Narrative in the Study of Pilgrimage**

Leaving aside personal and psychological issues, there are often questions which need to be raised concerning the philosophies and theologies which surround pilgrimage practice. Of course, the details of these vary for different cultural contexts, but some general patterns may be apparent which will assist an anthropological understanding. For example, we noted the "human" quality of the relationship with saints, especially the Virgin, amongst Spanish villagers in Christian's study and the contrast with the more abstracted, more "transcendent" theologies of the priests. It is notable that a distinction between a popular perspective associated with cults of pilgrimage saints and deities, on the one hand, and a more formalised theology associated with higher but more remote powers, on the other, is evident in the work of a number of writers. These include Betteridge (1992) on Muslim saints' shrines in Shiraz, Marx (1977) on Bedouin pilgrimage, N. Ross Crumrine (1992) on saints' cults which preserve ethnic identity in Latin America and Binford (1976) on a saint's cult in Rajasthan. A range of philosophical perspectives is likely to be found for almost any pilgrimage cult; "official" and popular perspectives often have to be separated.

Another recurrent theme is death. Ian Reader has pointed out that pilgrimages are often associated with death (1993:222). This can take different forms. Frequently, pilgrims are drawn into the presence of departed individuals, especially at the tombs of saints. There is a sense of making contact with the power and compassion of the holy individual, as well as of honouring them. Their loss might still be keenly felt in the case of recent figures, which provides a further incentive for making the journey. Cults which developed in such circumstances are a major concern of this study.

There are also pilgrimages which are undertaken in order to commemorate family members and other ancestors, for example at Shikoku in Japan (Reader 1993) and Varanasi in India (Parry 1994). In the case of the latter site, pilgrims may make their final journey there in order to die at the holy place, as discussed in a recent study by Justice (1997). These practices obviously draw upon the conceptions of death which are elaborated by their respective cultural traditions. This is an aspect of pilgrimage drawing upon the "religious" dimension, in Preston's terms, or the wider "cultural plane" of Morinis' scheme, though here, too, psychological considerations could be significant. Discussions of this type of pilgrimage feature prominently in the literature for South Asia, as we will see shortly.

One of the most important aspects of the "theology" of pilgrimage is the fact that the notion of pilgrimage itself has been extended to become a prominent theme within many cultures in different ways. In particular, the activity of undertaking a pilgrimage is a powerful root metaphor which enables people to conceptualize spiritual development, the course of their life or progression towards the hereafter. Morinis (1984) emphasized the significance of pilgrimage as metaphor in his study of Bengali pilgrimage. Any ordinary temple visit or act of worship can become a pilgrimage on a reduced scale. In India, this is reinforced by the multiple connotations of the word '*tirtha*'. In Sanskrit, it means a crossing point, a suitable spot for fording a river. By extension, *tirtha* means a pilgrim centre or any place where one may cross over to the divine realm, some of which are located beside rivers. In keeping with the broader sense of something which facilitates contact with the divine, sacred stones or yoga practices may also be referred to in this way. Within the Christian tradition, pilgrimage has often been used as a root metaphor for spiritual progress, and the passage of one's earthly life. This is apparent as much in Protestantism (for example Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress") despite its traditional qualms about the actual practice of pilgrimage, as in Catholicism and Orthodoxy.

In exploring the theology of pilgrimage, and general philosophical motifs which can be related to the wider cultural plane, we inevitably encounter the topics of symbolism and metaphor. Pilgrimage is an inherently symbolic undertaking. It permits the physical enactment of religious themes which can be held to have both an immanent, this-worldly reference and a transcendental, other-worldly, significance. In order to achieve this, pilgrimage makes use of both particular symbolic objects such as holy water, which could be the water in the Ganges or the water a priest pours into a pilgrim's hand, as well as whole symbolic narratives, myths and legends, which can be related and enacted. Stories about honoured saints and deities are recounted and conveyed through sermons and songs. Pilgrims can see themselves as performing a role within a wider symbolic narrative. In this way almost every aspect of the pilgrimage can come to have meaning. This is clearest, perhaps, for pilgrimages incorporating journeys which are said to retrace the steps of holy figures of earlier times.

A concern with symbolism can be found, perhaps not surprisingly, across each of the various theoretical positions which have been considered so far. Turnerians can point to symbols and metaphors in pilgrimage which encourage egalitarian social interaction, for example participants all wearing identical pilgrim's garb, or which represent ideal social situations, for example the use of the name "Jerusalem" to refer

to perfect heavenly society, as well as the actual city. On the other hand, there are plenty of symbols of division and conflict which can be pointed to by competing discourse theorists. There are often features of the management of time and space which serve to keep rival groups separate, for example distance maintained between Tamils and Sinhalese at Kataragama (Pfaffenberger 1979). The figure of St James "the Moorslayer", patron of Santiago, clearly associates a pilgrimage cult with an ideology sanctioning violent conflict (Costen 1993:141). Often we can ask; is the pilgrimage itself a symbol of social harmony and cohesion or of difference and dispute?

Symbolic objects and practices are, as we have seen, grist for the mill of psychodynamic theorists such as Obeyesekere. However, I am not convinced that it is necessary to have any prior theoretical commitment in order to do justice to the symbolic dimension of pilgrimage. Or, at least, I would suggest that by taking a phenomenological approach, as explored in the later part of the study, it is possible to explore the whole range of possible meanings which can emerge in the process of pilgrimage. By attempting to be open to the multiplicity of meanings which are encountered in the performance of pilgrimage it might be possible to avoid imposing preconceptions about what kinds of things "symbols" are, and what sorts of meanings they can have.

The concept of narrative is significant in the study of pilgrimage in several ways. There are both narratives which seem to have a thoroughly mythological character as well as those which are (or strive to be) more or less veridical accounts of historical events. (This is apart from narratives of a personal kind.) Both are of importance for the anthropologist, of course, and in either case a careful probing into the relevant historical background of the narratives is likely to be helpful. The manner in which history is understood through narrative, by participants and other interested parties, is often of central importance.

Writers on pilgrimage have increasingly appreciated the need to investigate the history of their particular traditions. Bowman (1985) has emphasised the significance of examining the origins and evolution of pilgrimage practices. In addition, some historians have taken a strong interest in pilgrimage in various periods especially the Middle Ages in Christian Europe (for example, Sumption 1975, Finucane 1977, Osterrieth 1989). The importance of attending to history has become more apparent with the development of the competing discourse perspective. History is often a contested area, and a resource which can be put to use by rival groups to justify their own convictions and interests. We will see this exemplified in the

present work. As Van der Veer (1988:57-58) has argued, anthropologists should not rest content with relating pilgrimage practices to prevailing philosophical and theological themes but should also enquire into the historical backdrop behind them. It might be found that some pilgrimage practices evolved in circumstances quite different from those supposed by their contemporary participants, as Bowman has pointed out (1985:7).

In recent years, since the development of approaches to pilgrimage which are critical of Turner's theorising, a number of collections of papers on pilgrimage have been published. There have been volumes concerning pilgrimage in China (Naquin and Chun-Fang 1992), Latin America (Crumrine and Morinis 1991), the United States (Rinschede and Bhardwaj 1990), the Muslim World (Eickelman and Piscatori 1990) and India (Jha 1985). Whilst no predominant theoretical perspective has emerged from them, they display increasing methodological sophistication and awareness of the varieties of pilgrimage - the multiple issues which impinge on this topic and the diverse techniques which can be used to investigate them. They move towards the multi-dimensional perspective which both Morinis (1992) and I regard as essential. An expanding and enriched stock of ethnographic data on pilgrimage is being accumulated, often with attention to the constant change in practices, and developments in the self-understanding of communities, which are commonly encountered. Themes of this kind, which have become important for anthropologists working in many areas, will be of critical importance in the present study.

There has been some tendency for Christian traditions to dominate the anthropological literature on pilgrimage. Notable writers within the two major sociological perspectives [Turner and Turner 1978, Sallnow 1987, contributors to Eade and Sallnow (eds) 1991] have concentrated on Christian pilgrimage. Nonetheless there have been useful additions to the literature concerning other traditions; for example Morinis (1992) has papers on Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Maori pilgrimages [see also the aforementioned Naquin and Chung-Fang (1992), Eickelman and Piscatori (1990) and Jha (1985)]. In particular, the literature on pilgrimage in South Asia is now quite extensive. However, it only periodically engages with the debates in the wider anthropology of pilgrimage. Perhaps this will change as the different theoretical perspectives become better known.

## Studies of Pilgrimage in South Asia

Studies relating to South Asian pilgrimage have been of several types. Interest was generated in the field, at around about the time when Victor Turner was writing, by seminal works by Bharati (1970) and Bhardwaj (1973). (A notable essay had also been published by Karve in 1962, and will be considered shortly.) Neither of these were based on information gathered by participant-observation, although Bhardwaj obtained some interesting empirical data by a survey technique. In his study, pilgrims were stopped at pilgrim centres for brief question-and-answer interviews employing questionnaires. The information so obtained enabled Bhardwaj to distinguish between different "levels" of site on the basis of how far pilgrims had travelled to reach them. He suggested that mundane concerns, this-worldly life problems, are likely to be taken to "regional" and "sub-regional" level shrines. By contrast, "Pan-Indian" sites attract pilgrims with more spiritual, transcendent concerns. The latter pilgrim centres can be said to affirm general themes within Hinduism such as "the ideal of purification of the soul" (Bhardwaj 1973:226) whereas the former are associated with religion which "tends to become a problem-solving social mechanism". Bhardwaj also adds that, for the regional and sub-regional shrines, "the pilgrim congregation includes a perceptible, and in certain cases a major, proportion of scheduled castes and large elements of semi-literate and illiterate population. The pilgrim fields of these shrines tend to remain restricted because beyond the regional cultural milieu the pilgrims cannot establish a personalized 'relationship' with the deities" (ibid:227). These general comments provide some information concerning different levels - which is an important matter, I emphasise the need to distinguish different categories in this study - but they do not provide much detail about the pilgrims, their behaviour and why the pilgrimage matters to them.

Amongst the relevant ethnographies for South Asia there are a number which concentrate on describing important centres, "sacred complexes", which attract pilgrims. Notable studies have been published for Varanasi (Parry 1994, Eck 1983, Vidyarthi et al 1979; see also Justice 1997), as well as Madurai (Fuller 1984), Ayodhya (Van der Veer 1988) and "Hindu" Gaya (Vidyarthi 1961). In general, the emphasis of these studies is on priests, renouncers and other permanent occupants of the holy places rather than on the pilgrims themselves. Obviously, the organisation of the pilgrim centres, and the practices of the "professional" residents, is an important matter which affects the pilgrimage experience of visitors. For example, pilgrims could hardly fail to be struck by "the notorious political in-fighting of the

priests and the venality of their demands" (Parry 1994:119) or their "mafia-like activities", as described by Van der Veer (1988:187). In addition, some pilgrims make a point of organising journeys within the area of the pilgrim centre (Saraswati 1985), so that their activities at the destination include ritualised journeying albeit on a restricted scale.

For the most part, we need to look to other studies for details concerning pilgrims themselves, although, of course, these can overlap with, and corroborate, information provided by the "sacred complex" studies. For example, Ann Gold (1988) has described a bus-tour pilgrimage undertaken with some fellow villagers from Rajasthan. She reports that, during a visit to Gaya, whilst "pilgrims almost universally feel that using up money at crossing places is one of the most desirable and appropriate side effects of pilgrimage", nevertheless, "they are ever guarding against exploitation". She then provides a verbatim transcription of an instance of haggling between pilgrims and a priest (Gold 1988:220-223).

Gold's study is notable for the fact that it is a village-based ethnography which includes extensive discussion of some pilgrimages undertaken by people from her fieldwork area. Pilgrimages to perform rites for the dead are especially prominent, as they often are for journeys to holy sites in the Ganges plain area, especially Varanasi. She was able to participate more or less as a pilgrim, although not performing such rites herself. She travelled with the other participants, some of whom she knew already.

The most striking point to emerge from her discussions with pilgrims was their considerable scepticism about the process, especially the possibility of attaining *moksha* or salvation. One said "*moksha* does not happen ... It does not come from wandering. Whatever you give, in whatever place give it. From this comes *moksha*. What kind of *dharma* is dirtying the water? But *dharma* is giving-and-taking" (Gold 1988:288). "Dirtying the water", bathing in the Ganges or placing ashes in it, is said to be of no use by this particularly sceptical pilgrim. Gold concludes that whilst there is a range of opinions it "does seem to boil down to using financial resources in a way that is qualitatively different from anything possible in the village" (ibid:291). It is making money offerings at the pilgrim centres which matters. This is a theme which features in the pilgrimages of Kerala, but not to the exclusion of other motives and benefits, and with less scepticism expressed by participants.

A study by E V Daniel (1984) is similar to that of Gold in being a village ethnography which contains extensive discussion of a pilgrimage which departed



from that village. It differs from Gold's in being a walking pilgrimage in South India in which Daniel participated fully. The village was in Tamil Nadu, but the destination, Sabarimala, is over the border in Kerala. In these respects its subject matter is much closer to that of the present study and we will return to it shortly in this chapter, as well as in later chapters.

There are other studies in which the anthropologist becomes an active participant in a South Asian pilgrimage but which differ from the accounts of Daniel and Gold because their focus is on pilgrimage from the outset; they do not treat it as a special excursion from day to day village life. Sax's (1991) investigation of a Himalayan pilgrimage and Karve's (1962, reprinted 1988) account of walking to Pandharpur are of this type, as is a study by Sekar (1992) of Sabarimala and the cult of its deity, Ayyappan. This approach is closer to that of the present study which is concerned primarily with a set of pilgrimages for which one particular community has developed notable enthusiasm. None of them, however, attempts to gain a comparative perspective for several pilgrimages within a region (Sax comes nearest) which is a major concern of this study.

A final category of South Asian pilgrimage studies is comprised of those accounts which are based mostly on observation at a pilgrim centre, not participation in a full sense, but aim to provide supplementary information, by means of interviews and conversations, in order to provide a fuller picture of pilgrims and their concerns. Studies by Binford (1976), Morinis (1984), Lynch (1988), Obeyesekere (1981) and Stirrat (1992) are all of this type. This approach is likely to be taken at pilgrim centres where the journeying component is not strongly emphasized. A potential advantage is that it may be easier to make contact with a wide range of pilgrims who have come from different places and backgrounds, travelling with different types of party. However, if the journeying process is emphasized, as for the pilgrimages of the present study, it would seem that a full involvement by the anthropologist in the journey comprises the most illuminating application of the participant-observation technique. Only by this means can one get an insight into the nature of the experience, and what it means, for pilgrims. Sometimes, however, staying put at the destination and conducting random interviews can be a useful additional technique.

The pilgrimage literature for South Asia seems, in general, to lend greater support to the competing discourse perspective than that of Turner. The ruthless behaviour of some of the priests at Varanasi, Ayodhya and Gaya, which has been mentioned, is indicative of rivalry and conflict at these holy places. In addition there has been

immense bitterness and widespread violence in connection with the disputed site of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya; an issue which has assumed all-India importance.

Nissan (1988) has pointed to the incorporation of pilgrimage sites and associated motifs into a broad political discourse propagating an ethnically slanted, nationalist agenda in Sri Lanka. One centre in particular, Anuradhapura, became important for "revivalists and nationalists seeking to promote a newly 'purified' Buddhism" (ibid:264). But, "if the promotion of Anuradhapura as a national centre was unifying at the level of the Sinhalese population, in the context of Sri Lanka as a whole it was not" (ibid:268). A new "imagined community" (Anderson 1983) thereby came to be expressed in opposition to the Tamils of Sri Lanka rather than the Christian Colonial influence.

Messerschmidt and Sharma (1981) reported in a study of a Hindu pilgrim centre in the Nepal Himalayas that social distance between pilgrims of different castes remained. Indeed, they found that the practices they observed were emphatically "structure affirming", there was no sign of anti-structural components or of *communitas* which could have supported a Turnerian perspective. The study of Sax (1991), which also concerns a Hindu pilgrimage in the Himalayas, this time in Uttarakhand in India, is notable for the fact that it documents sharp disagreements over conduct and organization during the event. The arguments arose mainly between Brahmins of different areas, but involved a Prince, the police and various other local people. In fact, the pilgrimage was seriously disrupted by these disputes, for example over whether animal sacrifice should be permitted. Sax says, rather emphatically, that the question of "whether Hindu pilgrimage validated some previous theoretical model was easily answered: it didn't. To be more precise, Hindu pilgrimage does not confirm the well-known theory of pilgrimage developed by Victor Turner" (Sax 1991:12). From his ethnography, it is clear why Sax was inclined to draw this conclusion - he does not mention the competing discourse approach which was emerging only at the time he was writing - but one might still ask whether he is justified in rejecting the Turnerian perspective for all Hindu pilgrimages. This seems not to be the case if we consider two of them more carefully.

## **Pandharpur and Sabarimala**

The published writings on two of India's pilgrimages have stood out for me as especially interesting, given the focus of my own work. These are the discussions of pilgrimage to Pandharpur in Maharashtra and Sabarimala in Kerala. They have both been discussed by a number of writers; Deleury (1960), Karve (1962 reprinted 1988), Mokashi (1987) and Stanley (1992) for Pandharpur and Daniel (1984), Waterstone (1989), Sekar (1992), Vaidyanathan (1992) and Kjaerholm (1986) for Sabarimala. Both of them are enormously popular, symbolically elaborated walking pilgrimages and therefore especially relevant for the subject-matter of the present study. Pilgrims usually belong to organised groups and some of them make the journey year after year (or even more often). These are pilgrimages of a strikingly elaborate kind, for which the participants undoubtedly consider that they are affected by the process of making the journey. The sense of being changed in some way by the experience is a fundamental part of the event, a point which is well conveyed by both Daniel and Mokashi in their accounts. There is rather little discussion of this theme in the pilgrimage literature for elsewhere in India, but it is certainly important for the pilgrimage traditions which we will be considering for Kerala. In fact, this is probably a result, in part, of the direct influence of the Sabarimala cult on other pilgrimages in Kerala. For this reason, and also because of the immense number of Kerala people involved, Sabarimala deserves attention in any study of pilgrimage in that state.

The fact that the Sabarimala and Pandharpur pilgrimages require long periods of walking is no minor detail. The exertion required ensures that participants usually regard them as "proper" pilgrimages. At least, they are often strongly motivated to maintain a "genuine", spiritually beneficial character during the journey. Many other people visit the pilgrim centres by using motor transport; but these are different occasions, with a wholly different quality and, according to the walkers, not really pilgrimages, at least in the same sense. This is important because it draws attention to the fact that participants' own understanding of their activity can decisively determine the character of the event and the ways in which it is elaborated.

The fact that the manner in which pilgrims conceptualize their journey, and their intentions for it, have a significant influence suggests three important considerations. First, the anthropologist must carefully probe the thoughts and reactions of participants (and others) which concern the pilgrimage. Intentions, motives, opinions and subsequent experiences can all be significant. Second, the anthropologist needs to be aware of the varieties of points of view, experiences and styles of organisation

which may be apparent, even for one particular pilgrimage. Third, the fact that pilgrimages usually demand committed engagement from their participants - this is a large part of what makes them pilgrimages - should encourage the anthropologist to strive for a full immersion in the process. In this way the experiences of the anthropologist will become an important clue for determining those aspects of the process which are most significant for pilgrims in general.

The wholehearted participation of the anthropologist in the pilgrimage is important because it is what friends and informants want to see - not to mention those who are professionally committed to encouraging participant-observation as a social scientific methodology - and makes them readier to share their own stories. In addition the process of undergoing an intense, meaning-laden experience is often integral to the pilgrimage process. It is simply not possible to formulate pertinent questions about the sensations of pain or the impact of the singing and chanting without having been immersed in them oneself. Furthermore, no interview or informal conversation can do justice to the innumerable meanings and qualities which are part of the experience of such pilgrimages. For this reason, I argue that a sort of two-pronged attack is necessary within exploration of the phenomenology of the pilgrimages. By this, I mean that it is necessary to detail as fully as possible the experiential process as undergone by the anthropologist whilst also attempting to explore as fully as possible the experiences, motives and attitudes of other pilgrims. The significance of looking at both of these together will be explored within the discussion of phenomenological aspects of pilgrimage.

The importance of the experiential process which is undergone by pilgrims walking to Pandharpur and Sabarimala has ensured that the writings on these pilgrimages are particularly vivid. Mokashi (1987) and Karve (1988) for Pandharpur and Daniel (1984) and Vaidyanathan (1992) for Sabarimala are especially notable in this respect. In fact, two of these writers are not social scientists (Mokashi and Vaidyanathan). This has the consequence that they do not discuss theoretical issues of interest to anthropologists, but it has the possible benefit that they show no inhibitions in presenting their own thoughts and feelings during the pilgrimage. None of these writers, however, attempted to follow up conversations which they had had during the pilgrimage with subsequent interviews and discussions. In my view, this is necessary for gaining a deeper insight into the pilgrimage. There is much that one simply cannot discuss during the journey - much that escapes one's attention or for which there simply is not time. It could be inappropriate to probe too far into an individual's opinions or life-history in the public setting of the pilgrimage. And, in

addition, it is extremely difficult to keep a good record of what has been said because conversations are often disjointed, it is not possible to write whilst walking, and frequently one is too tired.

The motives and intentions of participants in a pilgrimage are significant and can profoundly affect its character. One might suggest, in the light of this, that a pilgrimage will display the characteristics which its organisers and principal protagonists permit it to acquire. Of course, it would be wrong to slide into positing a naive intentionality here because there are so many factors which can become involved, intended or otherwise. However, it could be said, contra Sax, that some pilgrimages, such as the one he participated in, display division and conflict because principal organisers are motivated to squabble about certain things. We should not discount the possibility that, in other contexts, leading figures might be strongly motivated to encourage "normative communitas" which might have an impact on the character of the pilgrimage. A principle of egalitarian and harmonious interaction would be affirmed, which could have some influence, even though actual conduct might fall well short of the ideal. We should often ask; how important are the leading organisers and the philosophy which they wish to prevail during the pilgrimage?

Turner believed that the Pandharpur pilgrimage confirmed his ideas, that normative communitas was encouraged by the songs, sermons and casual remarks heard along the way which refer to a fully harmonious, egalitarian community. In fact, caste distinctions are generally maintained during the pilgrimage. However, it is worth pointing out that Turner considered the ethnographic example of Pandharpur to be very significant and believed that the process of undertaking the long, demanding walking required by the pilgrimage was the key to possible communitas. He quotes Deleury's comment on the Varkaris (i.e. pilgrims to Pandharpur): "The Varkari solution is a happy compromise between the reality of the distinctions between caste and the ideal of a social community to unite them ....The hardships of the way contribute to bind the various groups together and the good will of all prevents hurt and spares the feelings" (Deleury 1960:105; quoted in Turner 1974:207, emphasis added by Turner).

It is interesting to reflect that Turner might have been even more heartened by accounts of the Sabarimala pilgrimage. Daniel comments that, on being daubed with coloured paint at the start of the pilgrimage by "fellow pilgrims-cum-fellow villagers, several of them belonging to lower jatis", "I saw a new glow light up their faces. I was being transformed, and the last residue of social differences of rank and status

was beginning to disappear" (Daniel 1984:250). Daniel goes on to say "if the Maharashtrian pilgrimage described by Karve stopped short of intercaste commensalism, among Ayyappans no caste distinctions remained for caste commensalism to be practised" (Daniel 1984:255). (Pilgrims to Sabarimala are called Ayyappans.)

Waterstone (1989) argues that *communitas* is not the aim of the Sabarimala pilgrimage but may be its "context". He says, instead, that the significant point about the cult is that "Ayyappan incorporates the possibility that change may result in success". This is change in two senses. The self can be changed by identification with the "righteousness" that Ayyappan represents. At the same time there are the changes in society and daily life which must be handled. Ayyappan can assist in the latter because he is also the deity of domesticated order and control in the main village temple where Waterstone resided, and in other temples in the area (ibid:59-60).

These comments on possible *communitas* draw attention to the fact that symbolically elaborated walking pilgrimages may be associated with a degree of social transformation. However, we should carefully distinguish between the "official philosophies" of the pilgrimage, the declared intentions of organisers and leading enthusiasts on the one hand, and the realities of social behaviour on the other. This is implied by Turner's own distinction between normative and existential *communitas*. In order to assess the real social situation we need careful observation during the pilgrimage, of course. But we also need to know about subjective reactions, about the possible "hurts" and "feelings" in Deleury's words. We need to know what reflections and attitudes pilgrims take away from the event, and this will require retrospective discussion, dialogue with participants away from, as well as during, the journey. It seems at times that issues of social equality in the accounts of Karve and Daniel are preoccupations of the writer; we need to know how important these things are for other pilgrims. We should consider the possibility that political issues or other agendas supplant these matters in the minds of many pilgrims.

## **Pilgrimages of Christians and Hindus in Kerala**

Significant attention will be given to the Sabarimala pilgrimage in the following pages because, as noted, it is the most visible and popular pilgrimage in Kerala. However, the primary focus will be on the growing pilgrimage traditions of the Syrian Christians of Kerala. They comprise an ancient community which is remarkable in a number of respects, including a notable enthusiasm for pilgrimage which has burgeoned strikingly in recent years. There is little anthropological literature with a direct bearing on this. Some information is provided by Visvanathan (1993) and Younger (1989). However, influences from other traditions in India, especially within Kerala itself, and from some other parts of the Christian world will also need to be considered. In addition to this, a careful discussion of the complex and unique history of the Syrian Christians will be necessary in order to understand problematic issues concerning identity, theology and authority which have come to face the community. Against a background of these themes we can understand the significance of their current pilgrimage activities.

The Syrian Christians of Kerala do not comprise a single, monolithic social group, they are internally subdivided amongst a number of denominations and sects. The main focus of the present study is upon the so-called "Jacobites". They are Orthodox Christians who strongly value a surviving link with the Syrian Orthodox Church of the Middle East. Their identity and pilgrimage practices, in Kerala, however, acquire their significance in contrast to those of other Christians, especially rival Orthodox and Catholic groups. Consequently, we will need a thoroughly comparative perspective, examining the pilgrimage traditions of the various Christian groups in order to understand the practices of the section which is considered most fully.

The Christians of Kerala do not, of course, inhabit a cultural universe in which their own religion is dominant. Hinduism is at least as conspicuous in Central Kerala; Islam is important in Kerala too, but somewhat less so in the central region. There is mutual awareness amongst Christians and Hindus of each other's pilgrimage traditions. One could hardly fail to have some acquaintance with the Sabarimala phenomenon, in particular. Consequently Hindu pilgrimage deserves attention in the present study - in fact for two reasons. Firstly, the Sabarimala cult is enormously influential and affects the way in which people of all religions conceive of pilgrimage. Some Christians participate in it themselves, thereby further reinforcing its influence. Secondly, as we shall see, some Hindu communities, particular castes, have developed enthusiasm for their own distinctive pilgrimages in ways which parallel the development of such activities within the Christian denominations. This

deserves attention because it helps to shed light on the significance of pilgrimage for both communities. By exploring similarities and differences which emerge from examining apparently parallel phenomena we can gain further insight into the issues and processes involved.

The present study aims to consider pilgrimages from more than one religion, undertaken by different communities, in order to gain a comparative perspective from which common patterns and processes of mutual influence can be discerned. Because a comparative perspective is emphasized, to include both Christian and Hindu pilgrimages, as well as a commitment to explore both sociological and personal-psychological issues, I am inclined to call my approach a "double two-pronged attack", adapting Morinis' phrase. Pilgrimages of more than one religious tradition will be considered, with exploration of themes concerning both social relations and the experiences and motives of individual pilgrims (which I call the "phenomenological" material). In this way it is hoped that insight into the varieties of pilgrimage experience in Central Kerala can be obtained, indicating why the pilgrimages are growing in popularity and why they are significant.



## Summary of Chapter One

Chapter One reviews approaches to the anthropology of pilgrimage. Although studying pilgrimage presents some methodological difficulties, anthropologists have shed their former reluctance to research it. In the 1970s, the main stimulus was provided by Turner's ideas about *communitas*, a state of enhanced social bonding which was said to characterise pilgrimage. More recently a "competing discourse" approach has emphasised the fact that disputes and rival agendas often surround pilgrimage activity. These two approaches are broadly "sociological". It is argued that they should be supplemented by attention to personal and psychological aspects of pilgrimage. This is a rather neglected area despite the efforts of one or two writers such as Obeyesekere. A two-pronged approach combining the sociological and personal-psychological is advocated. At the same time, attention to narrative - legendary and historical - is important as well as issues of symbolism and theology. Pilgrimage studies in South Asia have sometimes been carried out with full participation by the researcher in the journeying process; especially effective accounts have been written for the Sabarimala and Pandharpur pilgrimages. In general, the South Asian ethnography appears more compatible with a competing discourse perspective, but for the Sabarimala and Pandharpur pilgrimages, Turnerian themes are certainly relevant. The present study aims to take a comparative perspective, examining various Christian as well as some Hindu pilgrimages. At the same time it will explore both sociological and psychological - specifically phenomenological issues.

## CHAPTER 2

### **THE CREATION OF THE "NEW KERALA": RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS, CAMPAIGNS AND MARCHES**

## **The Background: "Old Kerala".**

Kerala's people frequently say that "Kerala is different", referring to its very distinctive geography, history and culture when compared with other parts of India. Compared with other regions in less developed countries, it is considered "special", both politically and economically, and has received attention from scholars in recent years because it has been held to be a success. Despite natural resource limitations it has achieved impressive scores on quality of life indices. It has also maintained a reputation for religious toleration and a fiercely democratic ethos when such values have seemed to be under considerable strain elsewhere, from rising communalism and political corruption. Kerala's notable success in achieving good statistics for longevity, literacy and infant mortality has led to the notion of a "Kerala Model", a combination of policies and contingent factors which have led to its apparently enviable state. Many writers agree that Kerala is different (Centre for Development Studies 1975, Franke and Chasin 1989, Jeffrey 1992, Sibbons 1992).

Kerala comprises about 1% of the land area of India, but contains about 4% of the population; some thirty million people occupying an area smaller than the Netherlands. Much of the land is either mountainous or half-submerged in water (in the area of the backwaters) which means that land available for cultivation, and agreeable for habitation, is correspondingly reduced. There is an average of 660 people for every square kilometre. The great population density, especially in the low-lying areas of Central Kerala where the current fieldwork was carried out, is immediately striking to anyone travelling through the area. (Census of India 1991, Ernakulam District).

The movement of people and goods between Kerala and the rest of India has always been somewhat difficult, impeded by the high mountains of the Western Ghats. In general, natural resources are few, although conditions have long been favourable for the cultivation of spices. These have formed the basis of flourishing trade along the coastal belt for many centuries. Transportation inland is facilitated by the network of rivers, lakes and other waterways - a geographical feature which remains important for conveying people and commodities today, and is now being developed as a beautiful tourist attraction. However in addition to reducing the available land area, the ubiquitous waterways increase the risk of flooding. (Kerala State Gazetteer Vol. 1:66-70).

The Kerala region has been important for international trade, receiving visitors from across the Arabian sea, for many centuries. The Greeks and the Phoenicians, the

Romans and Arabs and, later, the rival European powers, all came to Kerala's shores. Especially at the time of the Venetian city state, it was an important stopping point for merchants en route to or from China. It is said that the contemporary use of large "Chinese-style" fishing nets by people around the Kerala backwaters is a legacy of this period. Early traders brought gold, silver and jewellery and acquired spices and hardwoods. Occasionally hoards of Roman coins are unearthed in Kerala, providing striking evidence of the importance of maritime trade throughout the centuries (A S Menon 1991). This feature of Kerala's history is of particular importance for the present study.

The traders from across the Arabian Sea brought their own religious traditions as well as their precious goods. Many settled along the Kerala coast to form communities of traders, thereby establishing a permanent presence on Kerala's territory. They were encouraged in this by local Rajahs and permitted to maintain both their distinctive business concerns and their religious practices. It was in this way that Christianity and Islam became established in the region, in each case at an early stage in the history of the religion. According to tradition, St. Thomas the Apostle travelled on a trading ship and arrived at Kodungallur, north of Cochin, in 52 C.E. He was thereby able to bring the Gospel to South India barely two decades after touching the wound in the side of the Risen Christ (Brown 1982, Gielen 1990).

Christians and Muslims have become influential and numerically significant communities within Kerala society, each comprising approximately 20% of the current population (exact figures are no longer collected). The Christians and Muslims are not internally homogeneous, although in some respects they can be regarded as single, discrete communities. In general, Muslims are most numerous in the northern part of the state - the former Malabar District. By contrast, Christians are preponderant in Central Kerala, the area within which the current research was carried out. The complex history of these Christians, which will be central to the discussion, will be considered in the next chapter.

In general, the physical protection provided by the Western Ghats seems to have reduced the frequency of invasion of Kerala by rival powers from elsewhere in South India. This has added to its relative historic isolation. Nonetheless, periods of such trans-regional conflict have sometimes comprised critical turning points in Kerala's history. In between, whilst there have been frequent rivalries between local chieftains and rulers, the changing fortunes of the various local powers have not necessarily affected the social structure of the region (A S Menon 1991), in particular the position of Christians has remained fairly constant throughout.

In her social history of Kerala, Genevieve Lemercurier (1994) argues that elements of each of the successive social systems which emerged in the history of the region have survived into the modern era. It is this which accounts for the diversity of contemporary Kerala society and the maintenance of very distinct identities and sub-cultures on the part of its constituent communities. This is especially apparent for the ancient Christian, Muslim and, also, Jewish traditions which persist in Kerala, but it also applies, according to Lemercurier, to Hindu castes and the various so-called scheduled tribes.

Lemercurier divides Kerala history into four main periods. These are characterised, firstly, by a lineage-based social structure with multiple different clan groups (ibid: chapter I) and, later, by monarchies based upon a tributary mode of production (ibid: chapter II). The latter eventually evolved, putatively under the influence of Brahminical Hinduism, into the fully-fledged caste system. This survived into the colonial era until it underwent radical reform in the modern period. It is notable that Buddhist, Jain and Hindu practices were equally prevalent until the rise of religious philosophies based on Vedic and Puranic texts and the *bhakti* schools between the seventh and ninth centuries (ibid: 85,90, A S Menon 1991:71). There has always been a complex patchwork of many religious traditions in Kerala. It is significant, also, that throughout the changes in social structure, Christians and Muslims retained their pivotal roles in managing trade along the coast with foreigners from across the Arabian sea.

The arrival of the Portuguese was significant for the Christians because the Portuguese attempted to force them into communion with Rome. As we will see, this was resented by a substantial proportion of the Christians, who had long maintained ecclesiastical ties with Middle Eastern Churches, for which reason they were known as "Syrian Christians". Apart from causing some political fragmentation in the area, the Portuguese and Dutch periods did not impact significantly upon the established social structure. Both powers did compete vigorously for control over the spice trade (Bayly 1989: 257-62).

The British period was different. Their intervention was initiated by the invasions of the rulers of Mysore, Haider Ali and, later, his son Tippu Sultan who conquered the northern half of Kerala. By defeating Tippu in 1791, the British established control over this northern area, Malabar. In 1808, when the British put down a revolt in Travancore, by now a single kingdom comprising the southern portion of the Kerala region, they gained control over all of the Malayalam-speaking areas which make up contemporary Kerala (Bayly 1989:281).

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Kerala social system under British rule went through a period of major upheaval. The "Old Kerala" gave way. It will be necessary to briefly outline the caste system as it was in the early British period before continuing to examine the social transformations which shaped Kerala history from the later part of the nineteenth century. The process of social change involved both Christians and Hindu reform movements, although in different ways. An understanding of this process is needed to appreciate the concern for social activism which characterises contemporary Kerala and colours the self-understanding and behaviour, including pilgrimage activities, of the various religious communities today.

Swami Vivekananda, the influential Hindu philosopher and disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, famously described Kerala, at the end of the nineteenth century, as "a madhouse of caste" (Mitra 1979:95). This was because the system was complex and oppressive even by the standards of India at the time. Although there were significant regional variations, the outlines of the system can be readily sketched. Leaving Christians and Muslims to one side, we can name nine principal groups, in descending order within the hierarchy, as follows; Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Ambalavasis, Samantans, Nayars, Kammalans, Izhavas, fishing castes, outcastes (Iyer 1909, Fuller 1976:34, C A Menon 1995).

Brahmins were traditionally priests. The highest ranking were Nambudiri Brahmins who could claim to have been settled in Kerala for many centuries. Somewhat lower ranked were Tamil Brahmins who had moved into Kerala much more recently from Tamil-speaking areas. The Kshatriyas were the ruling families, Ambalavasis were temple servants and musicians, Samantans were local chiefs. These groups were all fairly small. Much more numerous were the Nayars. Although ranked as Sudras - the lowest of the four varnas - they actually performed functions associated elsewhere with Kshatriyas, living as warriors and feudal landholders. Kammalans were artisan castes. Izhavas were traditionally "toddy tappers", producing an alcoholic drink from fermented sap of the coconut palm, although in practice they were usually tenant farmers or agricultural labourers. The Mukkuvans and other fishing castes were marginalized, low status groups scattered along the coast. Below them were the outcastes. These were highly polluting groups who lived, virtually, as slaves. In addition, there were tribal communities living in the hills and forests and who remained apart from the social mainstream.

Two points are significant for our present purposes. Firstly, some of the castes had distinctive kinship practices which came under considerable strain in the modern

period and were eventually overthrown altogether. The domestic arrangements of the Nayars have received particular attention (Fawcett 1915, Gough 1959, 1961, Mencher 1965, Fuller 1976, Jeffrey 1976, Moore 1985, 1988). Secondly, the caste system was very steeply hierarchical, with strict pollution rules serving to keep the various castes well apart from each other (Pereira 1989).

The Kshatriya, Ambalavasi and Nayar castes were all matrilineal. Izhavas, too, often emulated Nayars in this respect, although they seldom had much property to pass on. Nayars lived in joint family households called *taravads* which could, in principle, trace their descent through the female line to a common ancestress. Land was held together by the joint family, often carrying a number of tenant farmers and labourers on it.

Nayar men were often away on military expeditions. In part to accommodate this, Nayar men and women formed fairly flexible marriage alliances called *sambandham* unions, which could be arranged, and broken off, quite easily. In the case of women, these might be with men of a higher caste. The head of the Nayar household was the eldest male, the *karanavan*, who usually had complete authority over common property. The property of any Nayar returned, at death, to the *taravad* of his or her birth and thereby passed to subsequent generations matrilineally. Nayar men had no rights or responsibilities towards children fathered within *sambandham* relationships, who belonged to their mother's *taravad*. These arrangements led to increasing social strain when there was a shift, under the British, to a capitalist, money-based economy (Jeffrey 1976). Eventually, this led to the disintegration of the system.

Izhavas, although traditionally toddy tappers were, in practice, usually poor peasant farmers, sometimes, as noted, practising matrilineal inheritance. They maintained their own shrines and religious practices because they were barred from Brahmin-controlled temples (Aiyappan 1965, see also C. Osella 1993, F. Osella 1993). In time, this discrimination became a major source of resentment. The subsequent agitation for temple entry and wider social reform, in which Izhavas played a leading role, had an impact on the whole of Kerala society. In part because of this, and also because of their preponderance in my fieldwork neighbourhood, Izhavas feature prominently in the discussions of this work. The problems of poverty, discrimination and exclusion from sacred space which they experienced were even more severe for castes such as the Pulayas who ranked lower than Izhavas.

The pollution rules of Old Kerala were strict and, to the Europeans, extremely inhumane.<sup>1</sup> Higher castes considered that they could be polluted at a distance by the lower castes, who were therefore not simply "untouchable" but "unapproachable". There were prescribed distances which a low caste individual had to keep from his or her superior. Typical distances might be as follows (there seems to have been some variation); a Nayar should keep 16 feet from a Nambudiri, an Izhava 16 feet from a Nayar and 32 feet from a Nambudiri, a Pulaya 32 feet from an Izhava, 48 feet from a Nayar and 64 feet from a Nambudiri (Jeffrey 1992). Consequently lower castes were not allowed to use most public roads and had to run from any pathway if a Nambudiri or Nayar shouted that they were approaching. In addition, low castes were not permitted to tile the roofs of their homes and women could not wear clothing above the waist. They could not enter, or even go near, most of the temples. The importance of this for subsequent agitations for social and religious reform cannot be overstated. The symbolic significance of the right of access to sacred places and the ability to use public roads is a matter to which we will have to return as it continues to have symbolic resonance, albeit in a very different context, today.

The history, cultural practices and denominational divisions of the Syrian Christians are discussed in the next chapter. Here it must be noted that they were a fairly privileged group with a ranking comparable to Nayars. They avoided lower castes in a similar manner to Nayars, although they sometimes employed Izhavas as servants. Syrian Christians have always been strictly patrilineal, with domestic arrangements closely approximating those of European families.

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<sup>1</sup>Comprehensive accounts of the "Old Kerala" can be found in Iyer (1909, 1939) and C A Menon (1911, reprinted 1995), which are general survey works, and in the classic descriptions of Mateer (1883, reprinted 1991) and Day (1863, reprinted 1990).



## The Beginnings of Social Transformation

As the nineteenth century progressed, internal stresses as well as external political and economic forces brought about a period of rapid and far-reaching transformation within Kerala society. This process of change and upheaval has lasted until the present. It will be helpful to consider some of the characteristics of the changes and their implications for religious practices and sacred space.

The most important early influence for significant social change was Protestant missionaries (Jeffrey 1976, Gladstone 1984). They were permitted to enter Travancore and to establish missionary schools, mostly south of Trivandrum - in an area subsequently incorporated into Tamil Nadu - in the early nineteenth century. Although their numbers were few, they were influential and generally favoured by the ruling family. They established an important precedent in striving to educate poorer families, especially from low castes from whom they were most successful in winning converts. In time they became active in attempts to advance the social interests of their converts, and to some extent, the interests of the Hindu castes from which they had come. In particular, they achieved notable success in opposing the restriction on low caste women covering their breasts.

In Central Kerala, where Syrian Christians were well-established as a prominent community, Protestant missionaries, with active support from the British, began to facilitate the development of educational establishments, both for priests and laity. Their efforts began to be matched, in time, by similar initiatives by European Catholics and then by Hindu caste organizations, notably the Nayar Service Society (NSS) and the Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP), the caste organization of Izhavas. The educational achievements of the Syrian Christians began to bear fruit in increasing economic success which was attained by establishment of businesses, banks and acquisition of land, often for plantations (Mitra 1979, Pereira 1989).

Syrian Christians had a notable advantage over Nayars in attempting to rise to the challenges of the new economic conditions engendered by the encouragement of capitalist enterprise by the British including increasing sales of land. This was their patrilineal inheritance system. It facilitated the formation of relatively small, mobile nuclear families who could move on to new lands or into the growing business centres. Furthermore, it meant that a Syrian Christian man could encourage his own offspring to pursue interests in the same enterprises, secure in the knowledge that all property accumulated by him would be inherited by them. This incentive was

lacking for Nayers, who often resented the fact that their accumulated property would be returned to the larger unit of their matrilineal joint family; none of it would pass to their own offspring. Consequently, patrilineal systems also came to be increasingly favoured by Nayers, who were also influenced by the European prejudice against the *sambandham* marriages, which were increasingly disparaged by other Malayalis. This placed the *taravads*, the joint family households, under considerable strain even though traditionally there could be no separation of lineages and associated partition of property unless all members of the household agreed, a degree of consensus which was often difficult to achieve (Jeffrey 1976).

The NSS was particularly concerned to assist Nayers in developing "modern" practices of family organization and success in business enterprise. It was especially strong in the area of Central Travancore, having its headquarters at Changanacherry, an area in which Syrian Christians had long been a prominent community. It became almost routine for Nayar men to attempt to imitate the inheritance practices of Syrian Christians, although until changes in the relevant laws were introduced, well into the twentieth century, this remained a contentious matter. During the transition period, there were endless disputes concerning claims to portions of *taravad* property. In several respects, such as the establishment of patrilineal nuclear families, the creation of local caste organizations and credit unions similar to those of Christian churches, as well as encouragement of intra-caste solidarity, the NSS strived to encourage emulation of the perceived advantages of the increasingly successful Syrian Christians. It is notable that both Syrian Christians and Nayers actively encouraged the education of daughters as well as sons - in the case of the Christians because the missionaries favoured the principle of education for all, and in the case of Nayers because the matrilineal joint household (as well as the ruling families) had always thrived on the presence of articulate women. This tradition was later of much value in Kerala's drive for full literacy (Yesudas 1988).

At the same time, the NSS, as a movement for social and religious reform, was strongly influenced by the SNDP. Although the latter lacked the powerful economic base of the NSS, it wielded considerable influence in Kerala society, through its association with the revered Hindu holy man Sri Narayana Guru. The Guru was himself a member of the Izhava community - and attempted to effect reform of the religious practices of the lower castes, encouraging them to adopt rituals which had been the exclusive preserve of the highest castes. He founded temples to which there was unrestricted access, and encouraged offerings of fruits and flowers (not animal sacrifice), abstention from alcohol, and education in Sanskrit and Malayalam. After

1917, the Guru increasingly challenged the existing social order. He became especially interested in encouraging opportunity through education, whilst at the same time teaching against caste prejudice, alcoholism and any kind of demeaning or unhygienic practice. His slogan was "One caste, one religion, one god for man" (Sanoo 1978).

Sri Narayana Guru was opposed to the old-style kinship practices - polyandry, matriliney - as well as *thali*-tying ceremonies and other rituals which he considered extravagant and wasteful. He and his followers, many of whom were notably successful in organizing the administrative and campaigning activities of the movement, worked tirelessly to remove all social disadvantages suffered by Izhavas and lower status castes. Even though the rules concerning distance pollution were seldom observed as Kerala moved into the twentieth century, the restriction on temple entry and use of roads leading to temples - a large proportion of the public roads - remained. This was bitterly resented by members of the lower castes, especially by those Izhavas who had attained prosperity and so could regard themselves, in other respects, as the equals of Nayars and Syrian Christians. It stood alongside restriction on access to Government jobs as a chronic source of discontent amongst disadvantaged castes (Mitra 1979, Parameswaran 1979).

At first Sri Narayana Guru counteracted the restriction on temple entry by establishing his own temples, beginning with the installation of a Siva lingam at Aruvipuram, south of Trivandrum, in 1888. Conservative-minded Brahmins were scandalised, but Sri Narayana enigmatically commented that he had installed an Izhava Siva not a Brahmin Siva. In time, however, he became more concerned to facilitate the establishment of educational and training centres and, at the same time, motivated to directly challenge the social impediments imposed on disadvantaged castes. In this, both Sri Narayana and the entire reform-minded population of Kerala were encouraged by the example of the Nationalist campaigns, enthusiasm for which was sweeping across India in the 1920s, even though princely states such as Travancore and Cochin were not usually involved in direct challenges to British rule. Cochin, however, did establish a reputation as a haven for Indian nationalists from Malabar who were fleeing the British authorities there. This was especially significant following the famous but disastrous Mappila uprising of 1921 in which thousands of Muslims in Southern Malabar attacked landowners who were predominantly Hindu (D Menon 1994, Miller 1992).

## Campaigns and Jathas

The 1921 Mappila revolt in Malabar broke out at a time when agitations employing Gandhian techniques were gaining popularity across India. The Mappila revolt had taken place during the year after Gandhi's first visit to Malabar. Because of its violence, in that area the activities of the Congressmen seemed discredited for some years. However, further south in Central Travancore, another campaign which was directly advised by Gandhi soon had a more positive outcome. This was the 'Vaikom Satyagraha'. The town of Vaikom centred around a famous Siva temple, the roads to which were barred to lower castes, as elsewhere in the region. During 1924-25 the Vaikom campaign agitated against this restriction by marching protesters along the roads until they were met by barricades (Jeffrey 1992). Marchers made a point of including at least one Izhava and one Pulaya. At the barricades the marchers would sit down to sing songs and block the way. Later public fasts were organized. Sri Narayana Guru also took an interest in this campaign, apparently favouring a more assertive approach than Gandhi, including forced entry into the temple itself (Kumar n.d.).

The Vaikom Satyagraha was a notable event in Kerala's history for several reasons. It achieved the first notable success in Kerala for a Gandhi-inspired agitation - although the outcome was really a compromise in which the government built new roads around the temple but at sufficient distance not to offend conservative high-caste Hindus. The campaign was one of the most celebrated of the century which attempted to oppose disadvantages suffered by the lower castes. It comprised the beginning of a long struggle to win the right for all Hindus to enter temples. This was finally achieved in Travancore in 1936 and in Cochin in 1947. It could be said to mark the period of social radicalism in Kerala. Furthermore it established the *jatha*, or campaigning march, as a conspicuous feature of Kerala life. A walk by high-caste Hindu sympathisers was organized, on the specific advice of Gandhi, from Vaikom to Trivandrum. This was of considerable importance for our purposes because the *jatha* was both political demonstration, an attempt to highlight a cause or demand for political action, as well as an assertion of the possibility of traversing space, particularly sacred space, with the spirit of a quest, a *satyagraha*. Against the background of severely restricted movement and subsequent agitations against this, the *jatha* in Kerala acquired something of the character of a holy crusade as well as a demonstration for the particular political cause at issue (see D Menon 1994:138-9).

In a chapter entitled "Nationalism Inspires" in his book *Politics, Women and Well-being* Robin Jeffrey (1992) spells out very clearly the implications of the

development of the *jatha* phenomenon in Kerala. It is worth quoting his comments quite fully: "The Vaikom Satyagraha introduced the propaganda march into Kerala's political repertoire. Gandhi advised the leaders that they should stage a march of caste-Hindus from Vaikom to Trivandrum to present a memorial to the ruler stating that caste-Hindus did not object to lower castes using the disputed roads. For the first time, protesters walked through Kerala's villages, holding meetings, making speeches, spreading messages. They left Vaikom on 2nd November 1924 and, passing through dozens of villages and towns, took a week to cover the 150 kilometres to Trivandrum. By the time they reached the capital, the number of marchers had risen, according to one of the leaders, from 94 to a thousand" (Jeffrey 1992:118).

As Jeffrey notes (ibid:119) "today such marches - jathas - are commonplace ... but the march to Trivandrum in 1924 was the first to break the silence of rural Kerala". Furthermore, he says, "the march shattered silence, isolation and styles of behaviour .....the very act of marching from village to village demonstrated that former restrictions on movement no longer applied".

During the following years of the 1920s and 1930s there were further agitations for temple entry and other social causes, often using the *jatha* as a principal campaigning technique. At the same time, several important pilgrimage traditions became established which also drew upon the *jatha* model so that they combined elements of spiritual quest and political statement. Unlike the purely political *jathas* which were organised (as they still are) as one-off demonstrations in pursuit of a specific objective, the pilgrimages have persisted, occurring every year. They continue to convey a message and provide a vehicle for spiritual quest, although their meaning can be said to have evolved over the years.

In 1927 a march was organised to coincide with another visit by Gandhi; this time agitating for temple entry. It aroused the interest of many young boys as well as experienced political activists. Thereafter many decided to spin their own cloth, or *khadi*, and wear it as often as possible, especially during campaigns, in imitation of Gandhi. Some of the younger, more radical Congressmen came to be influenced by socialist thought and actively propagated Marxist teachings. Those activists later formed the nucleus for Kerala's powerful Communist movement.

In March 1930 Gandhi began a campaign of civil disobedience against the British which included the participation of supporters in Malabar. In May, a *jatha* set out from Trivandrum to Malabar, thereby expressing the support of people in the two

princely states. Kerala also had its own "salt march" led by P Krishna Pillai, who was later the first general secretary of the Communist Party in Kerala. Following the long walk of Gandhi and his 78 followers over 200 miles through Gujarat to the coast which began on 12 March 1930, a satyagraha march with 28 participants walked from Calicut to Payyannur and performed the forbidden action of manufacturing salt (Kumar n.d.). Some volunteers who had set out on foot from Trivandrum to join the march were beaten and arrested.

There was a temporary agreement between Gandhi and the viceroy, Lord Irwin, in 1931 which led to a lull in nationalist agitation. In Malabar, however, the period saw another campaign for temple entry, this time at Guruvayur, long regarded as a bastion of Brahminical orthodoxy. Gandhi encouraged the Guruvayur *satyagraha*, as did the NSS and the SNDP. A *jatha* marched from Guruvayur to Trivandrum. A notable participant was A K Gopalan, a former teacher who was to become a Communist following contact with Marxist ideas during imprisonment for his part in the civil disobedience campaigns which recommenced in 1932. On his release in 1936 he organized a "hunger march" and walked with some thirty others for more than a month from Malabar to Madras. Gopalan was an enthusiastic proponent of the *jatha* whether the cause was freedom from British rule or any other matter of social concern.

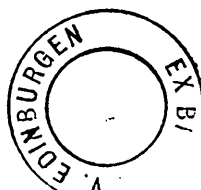
In 1938 a campaign of civil disobedience was launched in Travancore. The right for all Hindus to enter temples had been won in 1936, but now Congress activists were beginning to demand responsible and democratic government within the princely states as well as elsewhere in India. In Travancore the campaign successfully united much of the population, particularly in opposition to the haughty Dewan (chief minister) Sir C P Ramaswamy Aiyer. In the course of this campaign, a *jatha* marched from Calicut to Alleppey in support of some striking workers. Gopalan again participated and, as Jeffrey notes, he later claimed that he "was one of the creators of the *jatha* idea" (Jeffrey `1992:121). Again, Jeffrey emphasizes the significance of this: "the '*jatha* idea' implicitly attacked many of the principles of deference and acceptance which were established in old Kerala. Walking from place to place constituted an assault on the discreet localities which helped to maintain the old social system. But the marchers also had ideas to convey - at first about Gandhi, nationalism and the wickedness of caste; later, about the socialist promise of salvation" (ibid:121-2). One could also add religious ideas, particularly where these related to the social concerns of particular castes and denominations. Gandhi was the

most famous hero who could be emulated and honoured by the performance of *jatha*, but he was not the only one.

Shortly before he died in 1928 whilst staying at Kottayam en route to Vaikom, Sri Narayana Guru was asked for his permission to declare Sivagiri in Trivandrum District - by now the Guru's principal ashram - to be a place of pilgrimage for Izhavas of Kerala. When the Guru objected that there was already a famous temple nearby it was explained that Izhavas needed a holy centre because they still could not enter the major Hindu temples. The Guru therefore agreed to declare the first of January, New Years Day, to be the occasion each year of a pilgrimage to Sivagiri. He stipulated that pilgrims should observe, for ten days, the five purities of the Buddha - purity of Body, Food, Mind, Word and Deed. In this respect the occasion would resemble the pilgrimage to Sabarimala, for which a long period of abstinence of 41 days is traditionally prescribed. The dress for the pilgrims should be yellow, the Guru suggested, to contrast with the black of Sabarimala pilgrims, the saffron of renouncers and the white of a householder. Finally, the Guru stipulated that lectures should be arranged for pilgrims on subjects dear to his heart - education, cleanliness, piety, organization, agriculture, trade, handicrafts and technical training - and this should be regarded as the primary aim of the pilgrimage (Sanoo 1978:207-11).

Although the Guru passed away later in 1928, with his body entombed at Sivagiri, it was not until 1932 that it was possible to organize a pilgrimage in keeping with his wishes. In part this was a result of internal dissent within the Sri Narayana movement over management of the holy places. By that time, however, the *jatha* phenomenon was well-established in Kerala life. The walking pilgrimages soon became popular events and achieved prominence as occasions for highlighting the aims of the Sri Narayana movement and the aspirations of the Izhava caste. They have remained important up to the present time, drawing their inspiration from two notable features of contemporary Kerala culture - the *jatha* on the one hand and the symbolically elaborated pilgrimage journey, especially that to Sabarimala, on the other. In each case there are songs (or chants and slogans), there is a special garb which participants wear, and there is an ethic of self-sacrifice in pursuit of a higher objective. An egalitarian spirit prevails according to which all who are motivated may participate, walking together as partners and equals.

In 1931, there occurred an event which was critical for the Jacobite-Orthodox section of Syrian Christians of Kerala. The Patriarch of Antioch visited in order to attempt to heal a rift in the community between those who favoured close links with the Patriarchate and those who preferred greater autonomy. However, in February 1932,



whilst staying at Manjinikara near Pathanamthitta, the Patriarch suffered a heart attack and died. On the fortieth day following his demise, many supporters of the Patriarch travelled to Manjinikara to participate in a commemorative feast. Then, again, on the first anniversary a few pilgrims set out from near Ernakulam to walk to Manjinikara in honour of the deceased Prelate. The pilgrimage became a regular occurrence. In fact, it became an established practice of followers of the Patriarch at almost exactly the same time that the pilgrimage for Sri Narayana Guru first took place. There is no doubt that the walk to Manjinikara also acquired inspiration from the established Kerala pilgrimages, above all the well-known journey to Sabarimala, as well as the now well-publicized *jathas*. The walk to Manjinikara continues to take place each year - as important as ever to Patriarch followers. It displays, as we shall see, the characteristics of both holy journey and *jatha* and is, in this respect, as impressive as any other regular event in contemporary Kerala (Kaniampampil 1989).

Sometimes the principle of entering sacred space was dramatically exploited by campaigning marches, in a way which foreshadowed pilgrimages to disputed holy sites in later years. The civil disobedience of 1938, aiming for more representative and accountable government in Travancore, culminated in a huge procession on 23rd October. It marched into the old fort area of the city where the great temple dedicated to Sri Padmanabhaswamy (to whom the whole kingdom was said to belong) as well as government offices were located. Not long previously, lower castes could not enter any part of the fort area, still less the temple itself. Now under the leadership of a young Christian high school headmistress, Akkamana Cheriyan, they marched there in their thousands, although the Maharajah refused to see them (Jeffrey 1992). The campaign was vigorously supported by most sections of Kerala society, including Christians, Muslims and various Hindu castes. However, it was not until the arrival of Independence, with an ignominious flight from Kerala by the Dewan Sir C P Ramaswamy Aiyar, that its objectives could be said to have been achieved. In the meantime, other events intervened, with the onset of the Second World War.



## **The Emergence of Modern Kerala**

After many Malayalis had been badly hit by the Depression, with prices of coconuts in particular tumbling, famine was a real possibility in Kerala during the Second World War. However, mass starvation was averted, in contrast to the disaster which struck another rice-consuming area, Bengal. Various organizations - Communist, Congress and caste-based - forced the government into action. Food committees were set up to prevent hoarding and profiteering. A network of ration-shops was created to provide a small but fairly distributed ration of low-priced rice. The population of Kerala was, to an extent, radicalized by the experience. The "fair-price" shops, as they are now called, remain a significant feature of Kerala's endeavours to counter hardship amongst its people, with both a practical and symbolic importance. At the same time, the war established a pattern of large-scale migration by Kerala's population, seeking better circumstances elsewhere, which has remained a persistent feature of life in the state to the present time. Syrian Christians, for example, are faced with the challenge of maintaining their identity and traditions of worship both within Kerala and in migrant communities elsewhere.

When the British left in 1947, there was a suggestion of resistance by the Travancore government before it joined the new Indian nation, in combination with Cochin, as the new region of Travancore-Cochin. The era of modern democratic politics began, with the comparatively well-educated and radicalized Malayali population well-placed to demand that the new governments pursue beneficial policies. There had been a brief period of Maoist-style guerrilla tactics by the Communists; but it was a disaster and resulted in the killing of hundreds of unarmed factory and agricultural workers by troops at Punnapra and Vayalar in October 1946. These villages became pilgrim centres, of a kind, for the Communists. Thereafter the Communists pursued exclusively democratic means, and began to do well, especially in Malabar, but in parts of Travancore-Cochin as well (Nossiter 1982). In order to win the support of a well-informed electorate all politicians and activists had to promise commitment to improving education, health and the maintenance of fair-price shops.

When the modern state of Kerala was created in 1956, uniting all the Malayam-speaking areas as a single administrative entity, it created a sensation by electing a Communist government in the first elections to the Legislative Assembly. The new government set about introducing land reform and extending its influence in education, in particular with regard to the appointment of approved teachers (Nossiter 1988). However, it met with fierce resistance in both areas which culminated in the "Liberation Movement" of 1959. There were large-scale

demonstrations led by the Catholic Church and the NSS, often involving large numbers of women and children because Christian schools stopped work in support of the movement. After some violent clashes, the Delhi government dismissed the Communists and declared President's Rule. As a result of these incidents there was some persistent mutual suspicion between the Communists and the Christian Churches (Nossiter 1988:72-6).

These events seem to have politicised the Kerala electorate more than ever. To have influence it was clear that you had to be organised, whether you were Christian or Muslim, Nayar or Marxist. Furthermore, small political groups began to form, sometimes as breakaway sections from the main parties. They hoped to be able to form strategic alliances, bargaining for their interests, with one or other of the principal antagonists, the Communist or Congress parties. It is notable that the Communist share of the vote actually rose in the next elections in 1960, although they did much less well in terms of seats, and so were forced to sit in opposition. The level of popular support for radical policies, however, ensured that land reform as well as investment in education and health remained firmly on the agenda.

In the forty years since the first state elections, power has changed hands regularly. At times, there have been bewilderingly rapid changes of government, although this has been less apparent in recent years. Communists and Congressmen have shared the spoils of power, generally advocating socially progressive policies but increasingly burdened by the expense of government welfare programmes in a state which has failed to industrialize to any significant degree. Both the Communist and Congress parties have split, whilst other smaller parties have been formed, some specifically representing the interests of Christians or Izhavas.

By the 1970s, some significant land reform had been achieved. This alleviated the plight of many, especially former tenant farmers including many Izhavas, but did little for the landless labourers. The change was achieved more slowly and conservatively than the Communists had originally hoped; various evasions enabled some groups to retain more than the official fifteen acre ceiling on landholdings. At the same time, there have been steady improvements in educational and health facilities of a kind which have helped to shape the "Kerala model" and given rise to the State's notable success on the key quality of life indices (Oommen 1993).

Despite these achievements, Kerala's failure to industrialize means that it is increasingly difficult to afford welfare programmes for its expanding population. This is despite the fact that the relatively well-educated Malayalis are typically

having smaller families so that the population increase is slowing. This also makes them more mobile; ambitious Malayalis often leave Kerala in pursuit of employment in other parts of India or further afield. At the same time, the educated and politically active population maintains a reputation for being "problematic", with difficult labour relations. Consequently, inward investment is hard to attract; even successful Malayalis seem to invest elsewhere or in non-productive assets. Unemployment remains very high, including for the most highly-educated. Many expect to have to leave the state altogether. In the 1970s many Malayalis seized the opportunity of well-paid jobs in the Gulf. This has remained an important opening for employment, and a path to greater prosperity for professionals, skilled and unskilled workers alike (ibid:106-133).

For a time, the invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent war in 1990-1 threatened to shatter the "Gulf dream". Now, however, the State's dependence on this source of cash and employment is as great as ever. It has produced striking disparities in wealth; a skilled worker may occupy a vastly more luxurious and ostentatious house than a professional neighbour whose career has been pursued entirely at home. The liberalization of the Indian economy in the past few years has aimed to increase foreign investment. Whilst this has achieved notable success in nearby Bangalore, for example, it is not clear that the economy of Kerala has received the required boost. A significant increase in tourism has been the most notable development of recent years, though this could be a mixed blessing if the environment and culture of the region come increasingly under threat.

Modern Kerala is, perhaps, a muddle of contradictions. There are the notable quality of life indices, but also signs of widespread malnutrition amongst people that one encounters on a day to day basis. There is an egalitarian social ethic and a sense that, largely thanks to Gulf employment, almost anyone could get their "chance" and prosper. On the other hand, the high aspirations of many are thwarted by high unemployment and minimal increases in average standards of living. This leads to widespread frustration, and probably tensions within domestic life whether for families who have members absent in the Gulf or elsewhere or those who have inactive members who might, all too easily, seek solace in alcohol. Kerala has a higher suicide rate than any other State in India (a statistic which is less well publicised than the quality of life indices - I am unsure of the exact figure). Problems such as these are a recurrent theme in Malayalis' conversations - especially when discussing reasons for undertaking pilgrimage and the benefits for which they wish to pray.

## Summary of Chapter Two

Chapter two examines the history of Kerala, with particular emphasis on the social activism and accompanying changes of the twentieth century. It is noted that, from early in the Christian era, much of the foreign trade along the coast was controlled by Christian communities (and also Muslims). They have retained their comparatively privileged position and practised their own form of Syrian-influenced Christianity throughout the centuries.

Kerala had a steeply hierarchical and oppressive caste system, characterised by both "unapproachability" as well as untouchability, until it came under strain during the British period. The matrilineal joint-family households of some castes also began to break up in this period. The influence of Protestant missionaries and the rise of a capitalist economy initiated these changes; they were encouraged by the rise of Hindu reform movements. Campaigns were launched in the 1920s against restrictions forbidding low castes to enter temples or use roads which approached them. These agitations employed Gandhi-inspired techniques, notably including *jathas*, pilgrimage-like marches. Some pilgrimages to the burial sites of community leaders acquired, conversely, the characteristics of *jathas*. The modern state of Kerala, which was created in 1956, soon became associated with radical politics, often electing Communist-led administrations. However, Kerala has remained underindustrialised with the consequence that there are few opportunities for its generally well-educated population. This has led to frustrations and social strains which are often mentioned in connection with people's motives for undertaking pilgrimage.

## CHAPTER 3

### **THE JACOBITES OF ERNAKULAM AND THEIR NEIGHBOURS**

## Orientation and Choice of Location

Kerala became the geographical focus of my interest when I became aware of the depth and distinctiveness of the ancient Christian traditions there. I was interested in attending to the practices of the Christian community, with particular emphasis on their pilgrimage traditions. To do this, I felt I would need to situate myself somewhere in the Christian heartland of Central Kerala. I discussed this with a number of people in Britain before leaving for the field, in particular a friend who is a member of one of the most interesting groups, the Syrian Orthodox Church in Kerala, known as the "Jacobites". He emphasised that his own church has been strikingly enthusiastic about pilgrimage activity in the last twenty-five years or so. This is particularly the case in the area near to Ernakulam, but it involves people from all over the state as well. It seemed to me that it would be a good idea to base myself near to Cochin/Ernakulam to try to explore this phenomenon. What are these pilgrimages like and why has there been such a growth in popularity in recent years? Are they like other Christian pilgrimages or are they quite distinctive? What of the wider Hindu, and other religious contexts - are there similarities with pilgrimages of these traditions, is there some mutual influence? Are there general patterns in the category of pilgrimage across religions? What do these pilgrimages mean to the people who do them?

My fieldwork base, therefore, was in Ernakulam. I had time to explore the suitability of this choice because my first few months were based in Trivandrum, the capital of the state, undertaking training in Malayalam. I made regular trips out of the city to explore pilgrim centres and suitable fieldwork locations. In fact, I found that the Jacobite Community was even more enthusiastic about pilgrimage than I had expected, so this certainly seemed an interesting matter to explore. Ernakulam District is the heartland of this community and so, in a sense, self-selecting as a fieldwork area. It includes several of their important pilgrim centres. However, I was clear that I wanted to obtain an overview of pilgrimage as a phenomenon across communities and, in particular, be able to make comparisons with other Christian and Hindu traditions. Catholics (both Syrian and Latin) are the other prominent Christian group in Ernakulam area, and in fact one or two of their most important pilgrim centres are also in this area. Besides the Christians, Hindus are the most prominent community, especially Izhavas; they too have a number of pilgrim centres in the area.

During the first few months of my time in Kerala, I had a strong sense of the need to obtain a general knowledge of the culture, in particular religious culture. Partly, this is just a matter of unfamiliarity, one simply does not know what is relevant so one

attends to many things, almost at random. However, this also reflected my view that pilgrimage activity would not only involve different religions and castes, and all kinds of patterns of overlap and mutual influence might be seen, but also would intersect with many other aspects of culture besides religious practice, including political issues and the problems of life - in family relationships, health matters and so forth. Nonetheless, after I had become based in Ernakulam, I began to be more concentrated in my attention. Especially, I found that the Izhava community became prominent in my enquiries concerning Hindu traditions. They are a well-organised and visible community in the area; for example, they control the local temple. Certainly I had interaction with Nayers, Brahmins, Pulayas and other communities and gathered valuable information from them. But I was intrigued by some parallels between pilgrimage practices of Christians and Izhavas, and this further highlighted the latter as a principal comparison group from amongst the Hindus.

From the beginning it seemed clear to me that I needed to try to strike a balance between attending to a particular neighbourhood, a compact area within which I was based and within which I would hope to get some day to day familiarity with people, places and religious practices of local communities, whilst at the same time attempting to gather information on a wider area. The latter would include a network of pilgrim centres, and a fairly large pool of people with active involvement in either organising or participating in pilgrimages. Focussing on one pilgrim centre alone as a site for participant-observation fieldwork seemed inappropriate, both because it would probably not be busy as a pilgrim centre for much of the time, but also because I was interested in getting an impression of general patterns in pilgrimage activity, with a thoroughly comparative perspective, contrasting different sites and traditions. As a result of this emphasis there always seemed to be much to attend to, with quite a lot of time needed for travelling.

Despite a sense that I sometimes needed to be in more than one place at one time, the task did not seem unmanageably large. I decided that a familiarity with the several principal Jacobite pilgrim centres of Ernakulam District, with a knowledge of one or two main Catholic and Hindu sites, would provide the focus for a "micro-regional" study concerning Ernakulam and its environs. Beyond this, I would need some knowledge of the one or two principal pilgrimages of the Christian and Hindu traditions with destinations outside the area which also strongly attract people living within my area, and which therefore decisively influence their experience of and thinking about pilgrimage. All this would need to be against a background of a

general knowledge of the phenomenon of pilgrimage in the state as a whole, and indeed beyond.



## **Ernakulam Town, Ernakulam District<sup>2</sup> and their mixed populations.**

Ernakulam District is in Central Kerala, with the Arabian Sea to the west and the mountainous area of Idukki District, including some of the highest peaks of the Western Ghats, to the east. To the south is Kottayam District, which has long been strongly associated with Syrian Christians, and to the north Trichur District. During my fieldwork, I resided in the neighbourhood of North Ernakulam, in Ernakulam Town. This is a fairly quiet neighbourhood, but a short walk from M G Road (Mahatma Gandhi Road), the main thoroughfare bisecting the busiest commercial centre in Kerala. Another short walk, at a right angle to M G Road, would take one to the jetty for catching ferries across the harbour to Fort Cochin or the islands.

Ernakulam Town is developing rapidly. New, ever-taller buildings are being constructed. The centre is often congested, especially at peak times. The City of Cochin, comprising Ernakulam and Fort Cochin together with some other islands and suburbs, surrounds the second busiest port of India's west coast, after Bombay. Businesses are expanding, people are moving in, and prices are going up. The city is the centre of an area now designated Greater Cochin Metropolitan Area by the Kerala Government, with a population in excess of one million. This area includes a number of satellite towns such as Alwaye, and semi-rural areas. To the east is the rural part of Ernakulam District. It is somewhat hilly and includes a few medium-sized towns such as Kothamangalam.

Ernakulam Town contains a mixed population with both prosperous and less well-off residents. This applies within the Jacobite community, as well as within other sections. The Jacobites of the rural areas, many of whom are small-scale farmers, are, on average, conspicuously less affluent than their town-dwelling Syrian Christian counterparts. In the city, Jacobites are often professionals - teachers, doctors, lawyers, port officials - or salaried employees such as clerical workers, shop assistants or hotel staff. Many of these residents of the central, urban area maintain links with their natal villages, which may be elsewhere in the District or beyond. However there are, in addition, some well-established families who have long been resident in the town itself. The quality of life back in the villages is often strikingly different. There are some comfortable, prosperous looking homes but also many simple rough-brick houses with a few rooms. In the latter case, differences between Jacobites and, say, Izhava neighbours would be slight, in marked contrast to a Syrian

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<sup>2</sup>"Ernakulam Town" refers to the main urban area of Ernakulam District. Both are often called simply "Ernakulam", but I shall specify "Town" or "District" where there might be ambiguity. Likewise for Kottayam.

neighbourhood of long-standing prosperity, such as that studied by Visvanathan (1993) in Kottayam Town.

The principal place of worship for Jacobites living near the centre of Ernakulam Town is, strictly speaking, a chapel (not a church) which is under the private ownership of a local family. Sunday worship and principal calendar events are celebrated here. Sometimes there are weddings, but no one is ever buried here since it is private property. To the south-east of Ernakulam Town is St. George's Church, Karingachira. This is a famous old "Mother Church", that is to say one with pre-eminence in the area, somewhat like a cathedral. In fact, the Bishop of Cochin resides near to it. This is a focal point for Jacobites of Cochin diocese; many start their pilgrimages from here. I became quite familiar with this church and its congregation, as well as my own local chapel.

The Ernakulam area contains many churches, Jacobite/Orthodox, Protestant, and, especially, Catholic. In general, the Catholics, both Syrian and Latin, are the most conspicuous denomination of Christians. The social composition of *Syrian* Catholics is similar to that of Jacobites (Koilparampil 1982). By contrast, there are many poor families amongst the Latins, including many present and former fishermen (Arattukulam 1993, see also Busby 1995). There are also some recent converts.<sup>3</sup>

The Syrian Catholics (members of the Syro-Malabar Church) are notably more "latinized" than their Jacobite/Orthodox co-religionists. Their mass is much shorter, their priests do not marry, and they practise veneration of statues. The Syrian Catholics often call themselves simply "Roman Catholics". In all these respects, distinctions between Syrian and Latin Catholicism are somewhat blurred, so that, although officially a separate Church, Syrians worship in a manner close to that of fellow Catholics who were never influenced by a Middle Eastern connection. They are less conspicuously "Syrian" than the Jacobite/Orthodox Christians. All Catholics, and many others, are motivated to make pilgrimage to Malayattur. This is a mountain in Ernakulam District which is associated with St. Thomas. It is one of the most important destinations for pilgrimage in Central Kerala; we shall consider carefully how this pilgrimage differs from those which are peculiar to Jacobites.

Besides Christians, Hindus of all castes live in Ernakulam. There are, also, smaller numbers of Muslims and a few Jains, Jews and Sikhs. In the neighbourhood of North Ernakulam, Hindus of the Izhava caste are especially prominent. Izhavas were

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<sup>3</sup>General information, now somewhat out of date, on the social composition and, especially, the churches, temples and other locations in Ernakulam District is provided in the Ernakulam District Gazetteer compiled by A. Sreedhara Menon (1965).

traditionally said to work as "toddy tappers", collecting the sap of the palm tree to ferment into alcoholic toddy. In practice, they were usually cultivators of coconut and other trees or small-scale peasant farmers. Formerly, they were regarded as sufficiently polluting to be barred from entering temples, or using the roads around them, although they were not as polluting as the Pulayas and other groups which now comprise the so-called "scheduled castes".

In general, Izhavas have aspired to emulate Nayers, and hoped to achieve comparable social and economic status. In this regard, they have achieved considerable success, largely through the Sri Narayana movement, in particular the S.N.D.P. (Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Sangham) which became the principal caste organization. Also of significance were the land redistribution policies of Marxist governments which benefited many Izhava tenant farmers. Many members of the Izhava caste in Ernakulam are well-established academics, businessmen or other professionals. [C. Osella (1993) and F. Osella (1993) provide extensive discussion of Izhavas in Central Travancore - the area to the south of Kottayam District.]

The main temple in the neighbourhood of North Ernakulam is dedicated to Ayyappan, the deity of Sabarimala, and is owned by a trust which is affiliated to the Sri Narayana movement. The trust also runs a secondary school. People from the neighbourhood visit the temple to pay respects to Ayyappan; they may, in addition, join pilgrimages to Sabarimala from there. Nearby, there are also some ashrams affiliated to the Sri Narayana movement which are, in effect, community centres with one or two resident monks. They organize functions to mark the birthday and death anniversary of Sri Narayana Guru which are attended by people from the vicinity, mostly Izhavas. These ashrams also organize pilgrimages to Sivagiri, Sri Narayana's burial place. The most important time for this is in late December, to arrive at Sivagiri for New Year. The most important starting points are those associated with the life of Sri Narayana, such as the ashram at Alwaye, or sites connected with one of his associates, such as Sahoodaran Ayyappan from Cherai.

It is worth emphasising that despite the successes of the caste organisations, and the efforts of prominent Izhavas, it is still widely held that problems of discrimination and social prejudice remain. For this reason, many Izhavas favour maintaining quotas for positive discrimination to ensure that sufficient numbers of their caste gain government employment and places in educational institutions. This is the so-called "reservations" scheme. An obvious impediment to complete removal of social barriers is persistent caste endogamy, which Sri Narayana Guru tried to oppose. Conversion to Christianity, with subsequent entry to the ranks of the Syrians,

probably occurred at times in the past, but it is generally denied and is now, apparently, rare.

Since the right to enter temples was acquired by all Hindus (in 1936 in Travancore and in 1947 in Cochin), Izhavas have been as motivated as Nayars and other fellow Hindus to worship at the famous temples of Kerala. It could be said that there has been some "sanskritization" of their religiosity, not least because Sri Narayana Guru encouraged education in both Sanskrit and Malayalam literature. He emphasized worship of Siva, whilst he opposed snake worship or any kind of animal sacrifice - although the former persists amongst Izhavas and others. He wanted worship at the temples he founded to be conducted in an informed, hygienic and graceful manner, without waste or discrimination. There is a striking cleanliness and tranquility at the holy sites associated with the Sri Narayana movement, for example the Ayyappan Temple in North Ernakulam or the ashram in Alwaye.

The fact that the principal caste leader of the Izhavas, Sri Narayan Guru, is regarded as a great holy man and religious teacher by many members of other communities, has been greatly to their advantage. "He did more for this State than any government" one Brahmin said to me. The figure of Sri Narayana Guru provides a symbolic focus for Izhava caste organisations. In addition, developing the cult of the holy man continues to be socially, politically and, probably, spiritually beneficial for Izhavas. This is especially evident in the performance of his pilgrimage, which was established to honour him and which continues to be expanded and embellished. Social and religious occasions organised by Izhavas frequently occupied my time in the neighbourhood when I was not busy with Christian activities.

My own place of residence was not chosen because of any immediate proximity to a pilgrim centre. Infact overall convenience was the major consideration. I needed to be able to move easily around the Ernakulam area. It was for this reason that I chose to stay, therefore, in the northern part of Ernakulam Town where transport connections with other parts of the District are good. There is the added advantage that Ernakulam Town is a focus of activity - people often travel into the area for administration, business and education. It is also a vigorous centre for cultural life, festivals, meetings, marches and the like.

My own accommodation was an apartment in a large, modern building. It was of pleasant, well constructed, middle class character. The reasons for this choice were a combination of convenience and security - the flat was well located, easy to maintain and also secure. I was strongly advised that security would be important in the city,

as a foreigner would be noticed, and it might be evident that I was often away. I had to be away for some lengthy periods either doing pilgrimages or gaining more acquaintance with pilgrim centres or the home villages of pilgrims in the surrounding area. I explored the possibility of residing with a family, but it proved difficult to arrange this in an appropriate place, and would have been somewhat unreasonable to expect a family to adapt to the unpredictable comings and goings demanded by my work. In some ways I would have preferred a more traditional home, but the practical utility of the apartment as a base was the main consideration. In fact, my accommodation arrangement (an agreeable but not very characterful flat) is probably representative of the Ernakulam of the future. Apartment blocks of this kind are sprouting all over the city. It was certainly well located to facilitate an immersion into the life and religious (especially pilgrimage) practices of both my immediate vicinity and the rest of Ernakulam and its environs.

## **Making Use of Fieldwork Time**

Having acquired a suitable base in Ernakulam, how was I to use my time? In part it was a matter of trying to achieve an appropriate balance. On the one hand I wanted to gain a good knowledge of the different aspects of life - problems and concerns, aspirations and achievements - of people which cut across differences of religion or denomination. On the other hand, I wanted to get a good acquaintance with the particular characteristics which distinguish the communities in which I have a particular interest. Beyond this, I wanted to look, fairly exhaustively, into all the different aspects of the topic which is of most concern - that is, pilgrimage.

For reasons indicated earlier, I wished to get an insight into the significance of pilgrimage for people spread over an area consisting of Ernakulam and its environs. Various pilgrim centres and routes could be incorporated into this domain. Contact could be made with enthusiastic pilgrims from somewhat varied settings - suburbs, satellite towns, villages. It is important to emphasise that for Christian pilgrimage, especially of the Jacobites, the local parish may not be the relevant social unit in pilgrimage organisation - this may happen at the level of the diocese, or, indeed, for the whole community as a single unit. My own activities had to reflect this, so that whilst I could be a keen participant in worship with my local Jacobite congregation, I also needed to gain acquaintance with many other churches in the surrounding area. For example, I wanted to know which special occasions were marked both in my local church as well as further afield. This meant keeping a careful eye on the calendar, to note important dates in the annual cycle. Of course, when there was a pilgrimage involving members of the community, I wished to participate. Besides doing this for the Jacobites, I tried to gain some acquaintance with the activities of the Catholics (there was a nearby Catholic church as well) and those of Hindus, especially Izhavas.

Whilst attempting to keep up with the pilgrimage/ritual calendar, I wanted also to enter into plenty of conversations with neighbours, friends and others which would revolve around topics of concern to them. This is both informative and a natural way of building relationships. Against this background of establishing friendly relations one can hope that more personal reflections on topics of direct relevance can emerge as well, for example individual experiences during pilgrimage, private situations that affect the perceived significance of pilgrimage, or opinions and evaluations of religious issues. In addition to all this, there were specific enquiries to be made - scholars, priests, bishops and experienced pilgrims whose knowledge and views

could be sought. Background material, documents, historical details and pictures had to be collected.

Of course, there is no shortage of things to do. The problem is to achieve a balance - attending to the important pilgrimages and other events of the ritual calendar (attempting to avoid either clashes or exhaustion) whilst allocating time for specific, systematic data gathering and also allowing time for the more relaxed participation in local events which comprise community life. This last category encompasses tea shop encounters and drinks parties, weddings and demonstrations, shopping and going to the bank. It was necessary to strive to achieve as productive a balance as possible amongst these. One cannot attend to everything with the thoroughness that one would like. If a particular topic is foregrounded (as with pilgrimage in this case) it is inevitable that certain types of information must be focused upon, with effort made to "round out" the picture in appropriate ways. One cannot simply wait for the information to emerge. This is especially true if one is studying an area of some size. I had to determine priorities and then balance the time out in a way compatible with addressing them. An obvious difficulty here is that some lines of enquiry have to be pursued for some time before one gets a sense of whether they are significant or not, for example, determining whether such and such place really is an important pilgrimage destination and, if so, for whom. It is a matter of attention to detail, whilst maintaining a good sense of the larger picture.

It seems appropriate to emphasise that there are methodological dilemmas which probably cannot be completely satisfactorily resolved. Time is limited to 1½ years in this case and one cannot be in two places at once. There is a dilemma over how much to seek out information actively, busily pursuing enquiries, as opposed to simply being present, a figure in the neighbourhood. Some tilt towards the former is inevitable, it seems to me, when there is a fairly substantial area for which information is required. There is a danger, consequently, of belonging in some degree to many places, but fully to none, and this of course should be avoided. To some extent a busy schedule, with regular encounters with many people of a possibly limited quality, is a characteristic feature of living in an urban context. Whilst I became friendly with many people in outlying villages, I was not a resident of those villages. One should question, however, how far any village can really be treated as an isolated social unit, especially in Ernakulam District where people travel for work, shopping, leisure, and communications are generally good.

With a study of Christians, the structures of the Church give a good indication of the social units which are most relevant. With Hindu communities, such units are less

evident, in part because worship is much less likely to be congregational in character. Nonetheless, some equivalents are identifiable, for example the SNDP branches of the Izhava community, as well as various temple and educational trusts affiliated to the Sri Narayana movement. For the Jacobites, it seemed necessary to get at least a good familiarity with my own diocese (Cochin diocese) and its important constituent parishes, and to some degree with neighbouring dioceses of Ernakulam District. Beyond this, some familiarity with the situation of the Church in Central Kerala, especially Kottayam District to the south, was necessary. Kottayam is contested territory in the context of current Church divisions. It contrasts in some ways with Ernakulam District, and it is significant that some of the important pilgrimages pass through there.

It should be emphasized that I did not rely on my own judgement alone about what would comprise judicious allocation of time. My research assistants were invaluable in making suggestions of this kind, sharing with me their intuitive sense of the relative importance of different lines of enquiry. Throughout my period in Kerala several individuals helped me with translation of documents - historical tracts, pamphlets for pilgrims and saved me much time in this way. In addition, one man, Biju, who had initially befriended me as a waiter in a bar, and helped out casually by showing me some nearby pilgrim centres, proved invaluable as an interpreter and guide. I kept him on in this capacity because I found that he was always helpful, and as efficient as better-educated, graduate assistants. The role of interpreter proved especially important in researching pilgrimage, I found, because it was easy to become tired to a point where struggling with Malayalam was simply impossible. In addition, he was able to protect me from well-meaning, but intrusive, crowds when I was too preoccupied or too weary for fleeting conversational exchange.

During the initial part of my time in both Trivandrum and Ernakulam, at the same time as undergoing instruction in spoken Malayalam I had to grapple with the problem of gaining acquaintance with the main groups which comprise Kerala society and the main divisions within the religious categories. I needed to get a feel for their main characteristics and practices. A knowledge of the social composition and especially religious observances had to be obtained from a variety of sources including books, observation and discussions. Much of this information is not available in Britain, however carefully one prepares. Particularly important was an awareness of the history of the communities - especially the different Christian Churches. Although I had some knowledge of this before entering the field, it was only in Kerala that I had access to a wide range of reading matter (including



information for popular consumption) and could combine this with a sense of its perceived importance to people, as evident from conversation. The history informed my orientation in the contemporary sociology, and both of them informed my increasing awareness of the sacred geography of Kerala - which places are important to which traditions, with what degree of popularity and with what sorts of associated practices. This knowledge helped to situate my interest in particular pilgrimages, and to appreciate how many other aspects of Kerala life connected with the pilgrimage phenomenon and therefore to determine which other themes could be explored in my subsequent fieldwork.

I can illustrate this process of gaining orientation within the socially fragmented world of Kerala culture by recalling an incident from early in my time there. I was asking a young man (who subsequently became a good friend) about his Church membership. He told me he was "Catholic", so I asked whether he was (as I suspected) Syrian Catholic. He said "not Syrian, Roman Catholic". I said "so you mean Latin Catholic?" he said "not Latin, Roman Catholic". I felt somewhat exasperated and felt like saying "look, if you are Roman Catholic you have to be either Syrian or Latin in Kerala - I know because I have read the books". Instead of saying this, however, I managed to pursue a discussion of features of the liturgy and so resolve the matter to my satisfaction. What I did not know was that although the term "Syrian Catholic" is widely used in the literature to refer to Catholics belonging to one of the Churches in communion with Rome which use the Syriac-based liturgy, there is widespread confusion amongst people in Kerala as to the meaning of this term. This partly reflects the fact that the hierarchy tends to encourage all Catholics to refer to themselves as "Roman Catholics". Furthermore, since it is generally the Orthodox community which has been most conspicuous in emphasising its Syrian-ness, and there is now a section of the Orthodox who acknowledge the "Catholicos" (in Kottayam) as the head of their Church, many people infer (wrongly) that "Syrian Catholic" refers to this group. Indeed I was astonished when a deacon whom I felt sure to be Orthodox described himself as Syrian Catholic. In the literature, the phrase is never used in this way, but the confusion is often encountered. The confusion is understandable because the distinctions amongst the Christians, and their historical basis, are complex. The main points are best grasped in the context of a historical narrative. I will now present such a narrative which could be regarded as a synthesis of the potted histories which many of the Christians related to me.

## **Division and Dispute in the History of Kerala's Christians<sup>4</sup>**

According to tradition, Christianity was brought to India in 52 A.D. St Thomas arrived by boat at what is now Kodungallur, Kerala, making converts to Christianity, especially from amongst the Brahmins. He founded 7½ Churches in Kerala (the ½ being a cross or partly constructed church) which became the centres of Christian communities. Later St Thomas travelled on to Mylapore, in contemporary Madras, where he was martyred and buried.

We know very little about the early history of Christianity in Kerala, but it is likely that at least by the later part of the first millenium of the Christian era there were regular contacts between Christian communities of the Middle East and settlements of Christian traders on the south-west coast of India. In the Middle East, these were the Christian communities who were maintaining the Syrian tradition (that is, the use of Syriac as the language of worship). It is likely that clerics often travelled on the trading routes to reinforce the faith, and familiarity with tradition, of the Syrian Christians of South India.

By the fifth century, the Syrian Christians of the Middle East had become divided into two - the West Syrians (often called "Jacobites", sometimes "Monophysites") and the East Syrians (also known as "Nestorians"). This approximately corresponded with those who had been to the West of the Eastern edge of the Roman Empire (West Syrians), and those who were beyond, within the Persian Empire (East Syrians). It is a moot point which of these groups had stronger connections with the Christians of South India, but it is easier to find firm evidence for the presence of the Nestorians, and by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries they were, clearly, the dominant influence. At the height of their extent, the Nestorians had a presence in many parts of Asia - China, Mongolia, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka and elsewhere. It is worth noting that from a very early period, settlements of Jewish and Muslim traders were also established on the Malabar (ie. Kerala) coast. It is possible that some of the Jews subsequently converted to Christianity.

A set of somewhat isolated communities - mainly traders - maintaining the Syrian Christian traditions was present on the Kerala coast at the time of the arrival of the Portuguese, and the opening of the colonial era. It is common for contemporary

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<sup>4</sup>The following account is derived principally from oral narratives presented to me. A number of scholars have, however, written on the history of the Syrian Christians. These include: Brown (1982), Rae (1892), Richards (1908), Neill (1984, 1985) who are all Anglicans but sometimes sympathetic to a Jacobite perspective and Tisserant (1957) and Podipara (1970, 1973) from a Catholic point of view. Kaniamparampil (1989) and Daniel (1986) are the main Jacobite/Orthodox authored discussions.

Christians in Kerala to comment that there was simply one, united community of Syrian Christians until the interference of colonial powers and European missionaries. It is true that the period of division into multiple distinct denominations dates from the start of colonialism, but in fact we simply do not know whether there was factionalism or dispute of any kind amongst the Christians before this; the information is not available.

The Portuguese forcibly converted the Christians of Malabar (the older name for Kerala) to Catholicism. Sometimes persuasion, simply impressing upon these relatively isolated communities the power and (to the Portuguese) historical destiny of Rome, may have been sufficient. But where this failed, force was used - notably including the gathering up and "correcting" or burning of all the ancient Syrian texts. At the Synod of Diamper in 1599 (held in Udayamperur near to Cochin) the assembled clergy of the Church swore allegiance to Rome. The power of the Portuguese was irresistible and it effected, for a time, full absorption of the Christian communities into the Catholic fold. But as a complete victory, it was fairly shortlived. By the middle of the seventeenth century, Portuguese power on the Malabar coast was waning, their pockets of control were diminishing in extent, and they were shortly to be superseded by the Dutch as the dominant influence in the region. Christians in Kerala staged a rebellion, probably angered by resentment of heavy-handed interference by Jesuit missionaries. An oath was taken at Mattancherry in Cochin by an assembled crowd who touched a cross (or else held ropes attached to it) and vowed to resist the domination of Rome. This was known as the Oath of the Coonen (leaning) Cross.

Scholars still dispute the meaning of the oath - Catholics say it may have meant simply a rejection of interference by Jesuits (Kollaparampil 1981), most others say it was a complete severance of ties with Rome (Babu Paul 1986). In any case, the Christians were henceforth split between those motivated to maintain a connection with Rome, and those concerned to revive the older Syrian traditions and former status quo. It is said that the spark which ignited the rebellion was the capture, by the Portuguese, of a visiting Syrian prelate who intended to help revive the Syrian customs. It was rumoured that he was imprisoned on a ship and later drowned, possibly in Cochin harbour. In time, however, Syrian bishops did get through unimpeded, and the use of Syrian worship, with its associated theology and church organisation followed. The critical event of this kind was the arrival of one Mar Gregorios of Jerusalem, a senior bishop from Christendom's most holy city. He belonged to the West Syrian (Jacobite) tradition, and both revived the Syrian liturgy

and established (or perhaps re-established) a close connection between Kerala's Christians and the (Jacobite) Syrian Orthodox Church, headed by the Patriarch of Antioch. Mar Gregorios died in 1671 and was buried in North Paravur (north of Cochin) near to a church of St Thomas. He is the first of the bishop-saints of the Post-Coonen Cross era whose tombs have become important pilgrimage destinations.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, other bishops followed Mar Gregorios, arriving from the Middle East, and being buried in Kerala. Especially notable was Mar Basilio Eldho who died in 1685, an old man who had arrived in India only some two weeks previously. However, it appears that he was a Catholicos, head of the Church in his area (probably modern Iraq) and of almost equal standing with the Patriarch. He was buried at Kothamangalam, on the eastern side of present Ernakulam District, which consequently became a major pilgrim centre. The eighteenth century was a period of some confusion. The legitimacy of claims to authority over Christians was often disputed, both between those favouring a more Roman or Syrian orientation and, in fact, within these groups as well.

The Dutch were not generally motivated to interfere in the religious affairs of Kerala's people, and they were not conspicuously inclined to favour the non-Catholic Christians over others. For the most part, they were not interested in these disputes. The fortunes of the Christians waxed and waned with those of local rajahs and other rulers in the course of civil wars and other struggles within the region. On the whole the Jacobites seem to have fared less well, siding more detrimentally with the losing sides. Consequently, they were judged to be in a state of some impoverishment, with low standards of education (including amongst the priesthood), shoddy practices of worship and poor knowledge of theology, by the British when they became the dominant power in the region.

The British did not show the reluctance to become involved of the Dutch. They attempted to actively encourage the Jacobites to improve standards of education. A "Mission of Help" organised by the Church Missionary Society (of the Church of England) and encouraged by the British Resident arrived in Travancore (South/Central Kerala) to assist in this process. At first this was successful, and established friendly relations between the Anglicans and the Jacobites. However, in time suspicions grew that the Anglicans were as much motivated to bring about reform of the theology and practices of the Jacobites, possibly with a view to bringing them into communion with the Church of England, as they were to provide simple practical assistance. In a synod at Mavelikara in 1836 the Jacobites resolved to end their association with the Anglicans. Some Jacobites broke away and helped to

establish a Syrian congregation within the Church of England. There were others who remained with the Jacobites, but began to favour a process of reform of liturgy, theology and organisation within their Church. This dispute between reformist and conservative sections within the Church dominated the nineteenth century history of the Orthodox Christians.<sup>5</sup> Eventually the reformers were forced to break away to establish the Mar Thoma Church, the principal Syrian Protestant denomination. It maintains worship and customs of a Syrian type, but with a reformed theology and close relations with the Anglicans.

During the same time there was dispute amongst the Catholics. From the time of St Francis Xavier onwards, converts had been made to Roman Catholicism amongst lower-ranked castes, especially amongst fishing communities. The inclusion of these groups within the same Church as the Syrian Christians had always been difficult as there was a wide social gulf between them. However, in addition to this problem, there remained a view amongst some Syrians owing allegiance to Rome that they had been forced to accept too much domination by European clerics and missionaries. In response to this a separate, indigenous hierarchy was formed to constitute an autonomous Church, the Syro-Malabar Church, in communion with Rome. The so-called Syrian Catholics became formally distinct from the others (hence known as Latin Catholics).

By the twentieth century, the Syrian Christians were divided amongst Orthodox (Jacobite), Catholic (Syro-Malabar) and Protestant (Mar Thoma and Anglican) Churches. Protestants were also making converts from Hindu castes (especially of lower ranking), in parallel to the Latin Catholics. There may have been some such conversions to the Orthodox Church, because it would sometimes have been useful to boost numbers, especially in settlement of legal disputes.

In 1912, the Orthodox community was once again split down the middle. The underlying cause of the dispute was political intrigue in Turkey. The Patriarchs of Antioch had for many years resided at Mardin in Turkey and required official recognition in the form of a "firman" or decree from the Government of Turkey in order to exercise their power. This was withdrawn from one Patriarch, and after some delay, he was replaced by another in 1906. However, it was not clear whether this made any difference to the Christians in Kerala. Some said that the former had only lost political power in Turkey, and had not lost his spiritual authority, others held that

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<sup>5</sup>Up until the twentieth century, the terms "Jacobite" and "Orthodox" can be used interchangeably in a historical discussion, the former term emphasising the Syrian connection, the latter their conception of their theology as orthodox (c.f. footnote 6).

the latter would nonetheless have to be acknowledged as the legitimate Patriarch. The Metropolitan, i.e. Senior Bishop in Kerala of the time, took the view that the Church in Kerala had been put into an impossible situation, at least when the new Patriarch arrived and attempted to strengthen his authority over the Church there. The Metropolitan and the Patriarch quarrelled with the result that the latter declared the Metropolitan unfit for his position and announced his ex-communication (Samuel 1986). The Metropolitan responded to this by inviting the former, deposed Patriarch to Kerala to instigate the creation of a Catholicate, a local head for the Church in Kerala, whose powers would be in effect equivalent to those of the Patriarch, thus granting effective autonomy to the Church. This was not accepted by the other Patriarch nor by his successors. Thus in 1912 was created the split in the Orthodox community of Kerala, which has persisted until today. Some side with the Patriarch (they are known as the "Bawa", or Patriarch's, party) and others with the Catholicos who resides in Kottayam (these are known as the "Metran", or Bishop's, party). The two parties have seemed to be more or less irreconcilable. Law-suits have been fought persistently through the years to establish that one or other side comprises the legitimate Orthodox Church, with rights to the property and resources which have been built up over the years. Prominent clergy and laymen have achieved influence by establishing themselves as leaders of one or other section of partisans. There have been attempts to mediate and a number of rounds of "peace talks".

In 1930, a critical event occurred. A senior bishop called Mar Ivanios, long regarded as right-hand-man to the Metropolitan who had created the Catholicate, joined the Roman Catholic Church. He became the head of a new hierarchy, a separate Church, called the Syro-Malankara Church which would use the West Syrian rite (same as the Jacobites) but in communion with Rome. Mar Ivanios had a significant following amongst clergy, religious and laity. It was a major event which possibly threatened to bring the Jacobites en masse into the Catholic fold (and certainly many Catholics hoped this would happen). Against the background of this threat, it was arranged for the then Patriarch, Mar Ignatius Elias III, to visit Kerala in 1931 and attempt to effect a reconciliation and bring together the warring Orthodox factions. He could not achieve this goal, and on February 13th 1932, whilst staying at St Stephen's Church at Manjinikara, the Patriarch suffered a heart-attack and died. It was a devastating blow, especially to the Patriarch side which had looked to him to restore the morale of their group. He was the first Patriarch to die and be buried in Kerala. Forty days after his death some people walked to Manjinikara to commemorate him; they did

the same on the first anniversary. Thereafter the site became the most important destination of pilgrimage for the Jacobites.<sup>6</sup>

The individuals occupying the positions of Patriarch and Catholicos changed at intervals throughout the century, but the problem of division between the two groups has persisted. In 1958, the Supreme Court of India ruled that the institution of the Catholicate was legitimate. As a result, the Patriarch travelled to Kerala to acknowledge the Catholicos and effect a rapprochement - arguably his hand was forced. Whilst the Patriarch was thus acknowledged as the supreme spiritual head, his powers were subject to a constitution of 1934, drawn up by the Metran-side, according to which all decisions affecting the Church had to be passed by the Malankara Association (local assembly of the Church) chaired by the Catholicos. In 1964, the new Catholicos was actually enthroned by the Patriarch - peace seemed to have been established.

The peace did not last. By the early 1970s the Patriarch and some bishops siding with him, were once again in sharp disagreement with the Catholicos and some of his followers. The main point of difference was over whether the Catholicos could be said to be "seated upon the throne of St Thomas". If so, the Catholicos could be reckoned to possess his own apostolic legitimacy, of equal standing to the Patriarch, with the Church in India distinct and of equal standing to the other apostolic Churches, including the Syrian Orthodox Church. This was legitimate because St Thomas had founded the Church in India, according to the Catholicos side. The Patriarch side rejected this as having no basis in tradition, which acknowledged only the Mediterranean region thrones of Antioch, Constantinople, Rome and Alexandria. The dispute flared. The Patriarch raised some priests to the rank of Bishop without consulting the Malankara Association. The gulf widened with the result that the Patriarch ex-communicated the Catholicos, whilst the Catholicos side de-recognised the Patriarch. The community was split down the middle. The acrimonious disputes about authority, and control of property, were as bitter as ever. The Patriarch having earlier acknowledged the legitimacy of the Catholicate, he now enthroned his own Catholicos to lead his followers in Kerala, as well as several more bishops. There were now two complete, parallel hierarchies, in effect two separate Churches, each claiming to be the legitimate Orthodox Church and each seeking to control the membership and assets (including, of course, the significant pilgrim centres) of the

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<sup>6</sup>In contemporary Kerala, and henceforth in this thesis, "Jacobite" refers to Orthodox Christians loyal to the Patriarch of Antioch. The other side frequently refer to themselves, now, as simply "Orthodox", but Catholicos supporters will be specified as such wherever there might be ambiguity.

community. Legal battles in the courts and on-the-ground rivalries have dominated the Church's affairs for the last twenty five years as much as at any time.

It is against this background of more or less complete split in the community and the resultant struggle for control over the ancient and famous churches that there has been a big increase in enthusiasm for pilgrimage activity, especially on the part of the Jacobites (i.e. Patriarch followers). This group regards Manjinikara as its most holy pilgrimage centre, but also commemorates, by means of pilgrimage, the death anniversaries of many of the other bishop-saints of previous centuries who ventured to Kerala to strengthen the Syrian connection. Furthermore, it is clearly the case that many within the Jacobite community have come to see these pilgrimages as vital displays of loyalty by the Patriarch's followers and as a means of reinforcing the solidarity of their group. They also make a statement concerning the right to gain access to, and conduct worship within, some of the disputed holy sites. In response to this there has been, as we shall see, some parallel encouragement of pilgrimage by the Catholicos-side of the Orthodox. They have within their control the church in which is buried the leading local saint of the community - a Kerala born bishop, regarded as a great holy man by all Orthodox Christians, and indeed by many others as well.



## Jacobite Theology and Worship

In focussing on the Jacobites as a community born of schism, it would be wrong to give the impression that this is a group which is entirely preoccupied with the Church dispute. They are also proud of their distinctive liturgical, theological and other cultural traditions. Unfortunately it will not be possible to do justice to all aspects of the distinctive culture and sociology of the Jacobites in the present discussion. However, valuable information has been provided in a recent ethnography by Susan Visvanathan (1993) which concerns a Jacobite/Orthodox dominated neighbourhood in Kottayam Town.<sup>7</sup> She details popular understandings of the history of the community, and describes rites of passage, the symbolism of the mass and key events in the Syrian Christian calendar such as some of the festivals of the saints. Further consideration of some of these themes, with a more theological emphasis, is provided by Paul (1973) and, for the liturgy of the mass, by John (1988) and Rajan (1994). Here it will be necessary to emphasize those aspects of Jacobite culture which impinge on the practice of pilgrimage. In addition, significant respects in which the Jacobite community of the Ernakulam area is distinctive should be noted.

The most important feature of Jacobite theology and popular devotion for the present context is the very strong emphasis placed upon veneration of saints. This entails arranging festivals for famous saints of the ancient Christian tradition, regularly praying for intercession and, in addition, commemorating great figures of Church history, often by means of pilgrimage. As we have noted, tradition maintains that Christianity began in India with the arrival of St. Thomas, the doubting apostle. The Syrian Christians, who claim to have maintained the faith in India since those days, are often called "St. Thomas Christians". Sites which the apostle visited, including churches which he is said to have founded, have a hallowed status in the Syrian tradition of Kerala.

The precise significance of St. Thomas for the Syrians is not, however, uncontested. Jacobites maintain that the authority of the Patriarch of Antioch, who has held sway over "all the east" since the Council of Nicea in 325, derives from the fact that St. Peter was the first Bishop of Antioch. Hence the Patriarch of Antioch can be said to stand in legitimate apostolic succession from St. Peter, in the same way that the Pope derives legitimacy from St. Peter's subsequent position as Bishop of Rome. St Thomas, they argue, brought the Gospel to India, but established no episcopacy. He

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<sup>7</sup>A discussion of the anthropology of Syrian Christians in the early part of the twentieth century is provided by Anantakrishna Ayyar (1926). Relevant information, though concerned more with Syrian Catholics, can be found in Menachery (ed) 1973 and Fuller (1974).

is the apostle of India, but of less significance than St. Peter as the basis for the authority of the Church. This argument is now rejected by the Catholicos party, who maintain that the mere presence of St. Thomas, preaching and establishing churches in India, is sufficient to establish apostolic legitimacy. It is for this reason, they assert, that their Catholicos can be said to be seated on the "throne" of St. Thomas, meriting the title "His Holiness". St Thomas is all-important for the legitimacy of the Catholicos party, whilst some Jacobites, quite strikingly, may now even doubt the truth of the story that he reached India.

Another saint who is, despite relative obscurity, important for Jacobite identity is St. James, "the brother of Our Lord" (Paul 1973:51). It is said that he led the first celebrations of the mass in the upper room belonging to St. Mark. Jacobites say that the liturgy which they use for the mass is that of St. James. Certainly, it is acknowledged, songs and prayers have been added over time. But a conservative attitude towards maintaining the basic form of the liturgy, together with the use of Syriac, an evolved form of the Aramaic spoken by Jesus and his disciples, ensures a basic continuity, they maintain. In Kerala today, services are conducted in Malayalam with some Syriac. The component which remains firmly in place is the use of slow, lilting melodies dating from the early days of the Church.

The reason that the saints matter, in practical terms for ordinary people, is the efficacy which is claimed for intercessory prayer. The theology here is similar to that of Catholicism, though generally less elaborated. It is held that saints, even though departed, remain "quick" and "awake". For this reason they are probably able to perform miracles as they would have done when alive. Above all, however, is the fact that they can intercede on an individual's behalf by praying to God for help. The prayers of such holy people can be expected to have an influence which surpasses that of ordinary, sinful men and women. In particular, St. Mary occupies a unique position. As the mother of Jesus she can expect to be listened to, as she was when requesting the water to be turned into wine at the feast of Cana. Intercession by St. Mary is held to be particularly beneficial for those in need.

There are other saints from the early Christian tradition who feature prominently in Jacobite religiosity. St. George is especially popular; he is considered to have power over snakes and an ability to heal snakebite. This belief arises from an association with the dragon or serpent which he is invariably shown slaying. By extension, the dragon is said to be a metaphor for evil spirits, or the power of evil in general. St. Paul and St. John the Baptist are honoured as the patron saints of many churches. By

contrast, other saints such as St. Sebastian, St. Joseph or St. Antony, whilst widely encountered in Kerala, are almost exclusively associated with Catholic cults.

Every church will have at least one festival in honour of its patron saint, and will probably mark other saints' days as well. These are occasions for celebrating mass on a grand scale, with money offerings given in exchange for prayers to be said, by the priest, for named supplicants during mass. Other offerings are also characteristic of such occasions. Meals are provided for children, or the poor, or for general feasting. Cockerels may be offered for auction, a practice reminiscent of sacrifices which were common in previous centuries. For all church occasions, the day is reckoned to start from evening. This is consistent with Semitic or Middle Eastern practice. A fondness for maintaining customs that may strike observers as having a Semitic, specifically Jewish, character is evident in Jacobite choice of names. Their names are taken as much from the Old Testament, for example Abraham, Jacob, Sarah, as from the New Testament, which would be preferred by Catholics.

Bishops are figures of immense importance in Jacobite religiosity. Historically, they can be divided between those who originate from the Middle East - the Syriac cultural region - and those who were born in Kerala. A Patriarch or bishop of the former category is referred to as "Bawa", the latter as "Metran". Living bishops are treated with great respect, assuming, that is, that they are not siding with a rival party or denomination. It is usual to bow to receive blessing on encountering a bishop, who will be addressed as *Thirumeni* (Lord), a term sometimes used for Brahmin priests. The Jacobites especially revere the foreign bishops, in part because of their association with places such as Antioch, Damascus or Jerusalem, of Biblical fame. In addition, such foreign bishops have travelled to Kerala over the centuries to sustain the Syrian Christian community there. They often ended their days on Indian soil, and came to be seen as martyrs for the faith. The tombs of such bishops, some of whom have been officially recognized as saints, possess sacred power and hence comprise the destinations of Jacobite pilgrimages.

It is sometimes commented, especially by their ecclesiastical rivals, that the Jacobite esteem for foreign bishops has racial overtones. It resembles the attribution of racial superiority to Aryan Brahmins over Dravidian and pre-Dravidian castes, it is said. There is probably some truth in this. Syrian Christians have long regarded themselves as a distinct race, somewhat in the manner in which Jews in Cochin, or anywhere else, would. There is an expectation that Syrian Christians only marry other Syrian Christians, although intermarriage between Jacobite/Orthodox and Protestant denominations is now acceptable. Catholics remain unlikely to marry

outside their Church (Joseph 1994). The concept of racial exclusivity is very sharply maintained by the Knanaya, a strictly endogamous subsection of the Jacobites (there is a Catholic Knanaya group too). They are said to comprise the descendants of a single migration of Syrian Christians under one Thomas of Cana in 345 C.E. (Swiderski 1988). They have a separate diocese within the Jacobite community and are commonly called "Southists" (other Jacobites are "Northists"). Despite these facts, however, it should be said that the conviction on the part of Jacobites that they are preserving much of the character and spirit of the earliest forms of Christianity motivates their cherishing of the Middle Eastern connection as much as racial considerations.

Portraits of bishops and saints are prominently displayed in almost all Syrian Christian homes. They indicate the particular denominational allegiance of the residents, as well as their favourite saints. Popular legends and accounts of personal indebtedness to these figures are readily recalled. These pictures are found at shrines and accompany parties during walking pilgrimages; their status approaches that of icons. Photographs of bishops or clergy who are related to members of the household may be displayed. For Jacobites, there has long been an expectation that the role of priest will be passed down, patrilineally, within families. This is no longer regarded as a matter of automatic inheritance, but nonetheless remains quite common. It is usual for Jacobite priests to have families, provided that their marriage preceded their ordination; monks and bishops may not be married.

It would be inappropriate to devote much space to the various rites of passage which mark stages in the life of a Jacobite man or woman. Visvanathan (1993) and Paul (1973) describe the main events. However, some mention of funeral practices is necessary. This is because pilgrimages to the tombs of the bishop-saints occur, usually, on the day of commemoration of their demise. The pilgrimage therefore takes on some of the characteristics of a funeral procession. There are restrictions on the types of food which may be eaten - no meat, fish, eggs or curd. The standard dish is rice gruel with pulses or bean sprouts. In addition, small brown cakes made with molasses, called *neiappam*, are given to both mourners at funerals and pilgrims. After the death of a family member, the restricted diet may be maintained for up to forty days; the day of demise will be commemorated with feeding of clergy for at least a few years thereafter. Black flags and umbrellas are carried by mourners in funeral processions, but this is never done on pilgrimage, which is, after all, a hopeful occasion when devotees pray for the saint's blessing.

After departing their earthly life, bishops should be buried in a sitting position. It is said that this was common in the Persian-influenced parts of the Syriac cultural region. It is notable, however, that Hindu holy men are often buried similarly - Sri Narayana Guru, for example. In fact, there are many aspects of customary Jacobite practice which can be said to display cultural syncretism, drawing on features of Hindu, or perhaps Indian, tradition. These are often pointed out by Jacobites themselves, as traces of Hindu influence in their established customs.

Examples of Hindu influence in Jacobite tradition include the tying of a gold cross on a chain around the neck of the bride by priest or groom in a marriage ceremony. This resembles the *thali*-tying of Nayar marriage, now adopted by other castes as well. Both in Syrian Christian households and churches there are usually large brass oil lamps, similar to those found in Hindu temples. These are often surmounted by a distinctively Syrian Christian symbol - a cross with four equal arms, with a dove hovering over the top, representing the holy spirit, standing on a lotus leaf which represents India and its culture. The oil lamps are of considerable importance because the faithful donate, and take away, oil from them; at pilgrim centres the oil is considered to have especially significant curative properties.

In multiple respects, the culture of the Jacobites, and other Syrian Christians, can be said to mesh fully with that of the wider Kerala society. Certain times of the year are considered auspicious or inauspicious, especially for major undertakings such as marriages, a principle which is generally respected by Christians and non-Christians alike. Astrologers may well be consulted to check that prospective marriage partners are compatible. House building is governed by traditional principles, which must usually be interpreted by a Hindu specialist to ensure an auspicious beginning for the residence, although final blessings on completion are usually said by a Christian priest.

Jacobites are distinctive in the large number of fasts which they are supposed to observe throughout the year. Vegetarianism, sexual abstinence and high-minded spiritual seriousness were expected on all Wednesdays, Fridays, throughout Lent and for a number of shorter "Lents" at other times. Most Jacobites cheerfully admit that the old restrictions are much less fully observed now. Days for commemoration of the saints continue to be marked, calculated according to the Gregorian calendar of Catholic and Western Christianity, with anniversaries for the bishops buried in Kerala scattered throughout the year.

The predominant character of Jacobite worship, especially evident in the mass, is the emphasis upon mystery. There is the mystery of the incarnation of God as an individual man, the sacrifice in which Jesus gave his life, and the resurrection and possibility of renewed communion with God. These themes are present in the enactment of a "religious drama" (Paul 1973:53) which is expressed through the liturgy. A number of features heighten the sense of mystery. The sanctuary is frequently veiled, so that part of the service is conducted out of sight. When it is drawn aside, there is much use of incense and ringing of bells, both small hand bells and others which are lodged in circular metallic fans held at the end of long poles. The celebrant wears bright, elaborately decorated vestments. The congregation regularly make the sign of the cross and also exchange the kiss of peace, performed rather like a two-handed handshake but with the hands held flat, as though lowered from the prayer position. The priest is expected to be able to bring a sense of mystery and drama to the performance of the ritual.

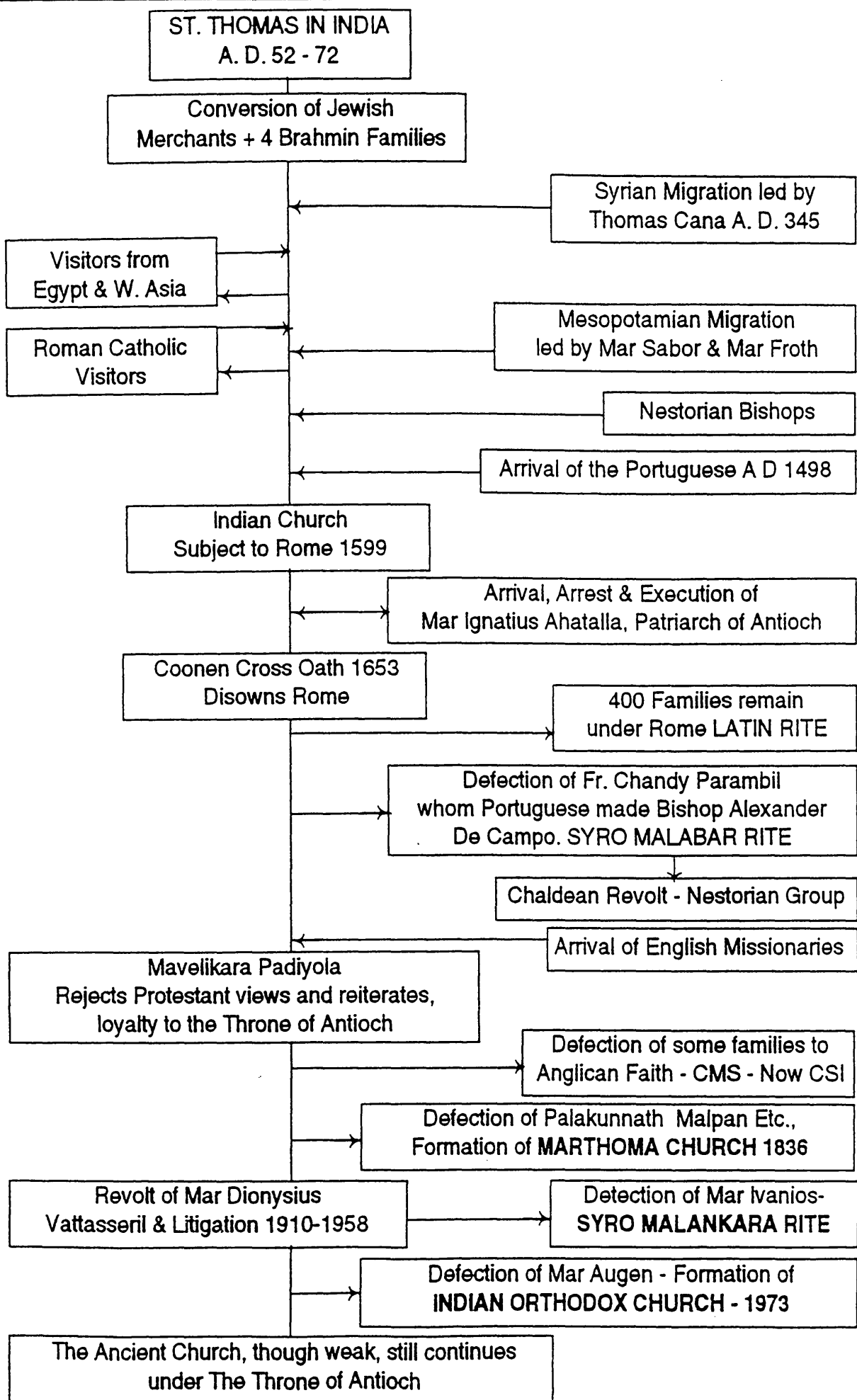
It is during the mass that prayers for St. Mary, the other saints and the fathers of the Church are said. In other words, the faithful are reminded of the importance of precisely those figures whose intercession may be sought through private prayer or on pilgrimage. Communion is taken intermittently, at least once a year, but not every week. The congregation stands almost throughout the long service. At morning and evening prayers, which are observed by the more devout, as well as at some other occasions, there are prostrations. The mysteriousness of faith is emphasised, it is said, by cherishing ancient, Middle Eastern traditions. These features help to create what one can call a "phenomenology of tradition" in Jacobite worship. There is a powerful sense that these components of worship, regarded with awe and affection, constitute the appropriate way to do things; a priceless asset of the community. The dramatic quality of Jacobite liturgy is displayed not only for Church members but also for the many Hindus who turn up at feast days and participate in pilgrimages.

The exact status of Syrian Christians vis à vis Hindu castes in the "Old Kerala" is a matter on which opinions vary. This is probably because claims that they are descended from Brahmin converts, on the one hand, or Nayar converts on the other, are both prevalent. It is reasonable to say that they have generally ranked about equal to Nayars. They certainly ranked above Izhavas and other more polluting castes. This is one reason for the usual denial by Syrian Christians that there have been conversions to their ranks from these lower castes (Fuller 1976, 1977).

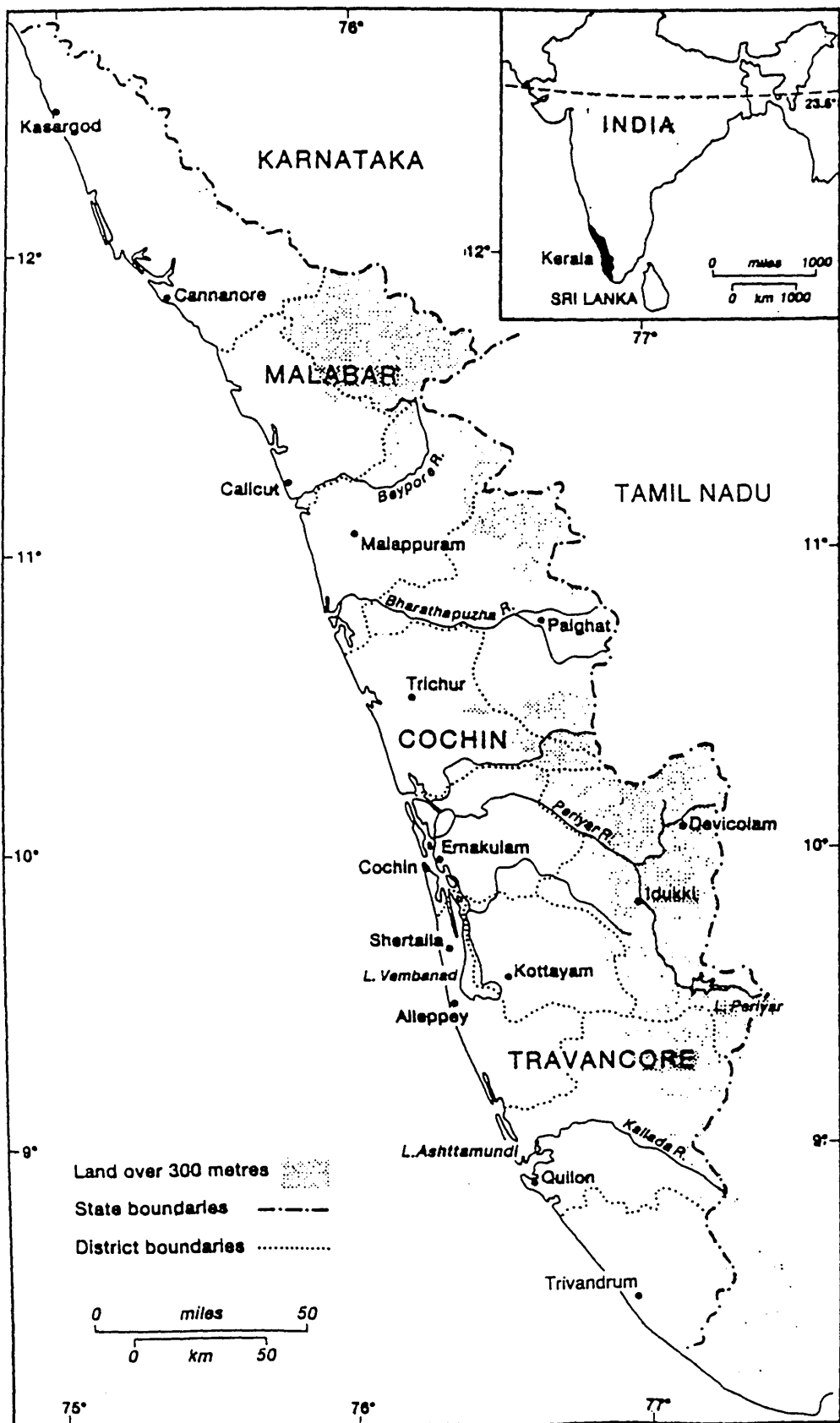
The most obvious differences in social structure between Syrians and Hindus concerned principles of descent; Nayars and some other Hindus were matrilineal,

Christians always patrilineal. Another crucial difference was the extent of the influence of the Church. The organization of the Christians into parishes within a diocese within a denomination gave their community some cohesion, with the single institution of the Church having an almost all-pervasive influence in their lives. To some extent, this has been matched by Hindu caste organizations with their local branches, regional centres and headquarters. But whilst the latter manage some temples and schools, they do not have the degree of control over the religious lives of their members which is possessed by the Christian Churches, especially since the Christian hierarchy now opposes any spiritual eclecticism.

Jacobites, as well as other Syrian Christians, attempt to maintain high standards in education, by maintaining schools, and in health care by managing hospitals. Revenue derived from pilgrim centres is important for financing these facilities, and other charitable endeavours. Education in English-medium schools is popular, though more are run by Catholics than Jacobites. A network of Sunday schools helps to ensure that the faithful have a knowledge of Church teaching and history. Most Syrian Christians have a well-developed sense of their history, as propagated by popular narrative and discussed by scholars, some of whom acquire the status of official voices for their denomination. Kaniamparampil (1989) provides an account of Jacobite history by their own leading scholar; Daniel (1986) is the standard history from an Orthodox perspective. The significance of an appreciation of their own history will be fully apparent in examining the pilgrimage traditions of the Jacobites.







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Map of Kerala; Ernakulam Town is marked, with Ernakulam District indicated by a dotted line.

### Summary of Chapter Three

Chapter three describes Ernakulam Town and Ernakulam District and some of the main communities living there. Christians are prominent in the area, including Jacobites (Syrian Orthodox) and Catholics (both Syrian and Latin). Hindus comprise the other large group, with Izhavas especially conspicuous in the neighbourhood of North Ernakulam within which I resided. Whilst many members of these communities are professionals working in the city, there are also many less prosperous residents of the urban area within each of the groups. In the rural areas, there are many small-scale farmers of modest means, both Christian and Hindu. Whilst staying in Ernakulam, I regularly attended the local Jacobite chapel and also made frequent visits to local Catholic churches and the nearby Izhava-managed temple. Whenever possible I participated in pilgrimages departing from the area. In particular, this included Jacobite pilgrimages; Ernakulam is their heartland and they have several important pilgrim centres in the District.

The history of Kerala's Christians is complex. Successive schisms have divided the Syrians amongst Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant sections. In the twentieth century, the Orthodox have been further divided between those who favour close ties with the Patriarch of Antioch (Jacobites) and those who favour greater autonomy (Catholicos supporters). Jacobite theology is characterised by a strong emphasis upon the intercession of the saints. Jacobites are proud of maintaining a distinctive and ancient liturgy which is said to display the mystery of faith and worship. In addition, they have a strong sense of their own history and identity.

## CHAPTER 4

### **THE MANJINIKARA PILGRIMAGE AND ITS IMITATORS**

## Preliminaries to Departure

Having relocated from Trivandrum to Cochin in October 1994, I continued to find Ernakulam new and unfamiliar for the last two months of that year, and probably the first month of 1995. I would get lost easily, and not recognise the names of places. I was often struck by the greater crowdedness, and dustiness, of Ernakulam. It took some time to get to know people, as I had done in Trivandrum. By February I had the sense that things were falling into place, with some satisfactory knowledge of local communities and geography. My schedule was following a (partly) ordered pattern, and the general routines of existence in that environment (shopping, using transport, going to church, going for a drink) were becoming familiar. It was perhaps appropriate that it was at this time that the largest Jacobite pilgrimage in the annual cycle should come round. I had seen some Christian (including Jacobite) pilgrimages before, travelling up from Trivandrum to observe the concluding functions at the destinations, and I had done some Hindu pilgrimages. But it was only with the round of pilgrimages occurring during 1995 that I was fully able to participate in the Christian ones.

When the time arrives, there is a considerable sense of occasion because, for many Jacobites, the Manjinikara pilgrimage is the pilgrimage. Most Jacobites will have a portrait of Mar Ignatius Elias III, the Patriarch buried at Manjinikara, displayed somewhere in their homes. There are small roadside shrines dedicated to this Patriarch, as well as some churches, scattered across Central Kerala. He is remembered in prayers for intercession during every mass, and therefore recalled at least on Sundays (quite likely more often in private prayer) by all the faithful. Jacobites always emphasise in conversation that they are the Christians in Kerala loyal to the Patriarch of Antioch. This is the occasion for honouring one such Patriarch and, as the only one buried in Kerala, he stands as a representative for all of them. Preparations for the pilgrimage will begin some months in advance for principal organising Committees, and at least some weeks beforehand for those who will provide refreshments, or print information leaflets or provide one of the back-up vehicles. Committees must, particularly, decide if there needs to be alteration of route or timings from previous years. Priests encourage their congregations to assist, or participate. For those people interested in the topic of pilgrimage, this is the one which dominates conversation.

Although I knew one or two people who would definitely be participating, they would not necessarily be beginning from the appropriate starting point for me. This was St George's Church, Karingachira, the main starting point for people of Cochin

diocese. I resolved to make a point of following the appropriate route completely - to arrive at Karingachira and participate, thenceforth, as an ordinary pilgrim. I was determined to try to participate fully in the entire event. The journey would take four days in all, finishing with mass on the fifth morning and with two nights walking. My assistant, Biju, however, had been having some problems with arthritis of the knee. We agreed that it would be helpful if he could, if possible, participate on the first and last days. We had collected a printed programme from the priest at Karingachira Church which indicated the route and schedule. We had also checked that no special clothing or other requirements applied, though a few personal items (comb, light change of clothing) which could easily be carried, were desirable. People eat entirely vegetarian food during the pilgrimage, as well as abstaining from alcohol. It is common to begin this on the previous day, or sometimes a few days before in a period of prayerful preparation. There seems to be no definite rule on this point.

We rose early in the morning of Tuesday 7th February 1995. It was still dark on rising and not fully light when leaving home at about 6.15am. Karingachira is on the south-eastern side of Cochin, so we planned to get the 6.30am bus from the nearby main road of our neighbourhood. That is not what happened. Whilst another bus was waiting at our stop, the bus we needed sped past, without so much as a glance from the driver to see if anyone at the stop needed his bus. This somewhat inauspicious start seemed to typify the mishaps that can occur in fieldwork - probably anywhere, certainly to me in Kerala. We waited some minutes but it was clear that not many buses were on the road at that time. We rather anxiously hailed an autorickshaw and pattered along to Karingachira much more slowly than we would have on the bus. As a result of this our attendance at the pre-pilgrimage prayers inside the church was somewhat cut short. As a matter of fact, these follow a fairly standard form and I was able to observe them for other pilgrimages.

At a few minutes after seven o'clock, we were quickly out onto the forecourt of the church for the starting-point group photograph. For many people a photograph is taken as a memento, but it is also an official record of who participated in, or organised, the pilgrimage. Photographers from the press are usually present. This is, significantly, a part of the process of encouraging publicity. The Bishop was present to bless the start of the pilgrimage; also present were the vicars of neighbouring churches, members of the organising committee, volunteers and other participants. A few people held ornamental umbrellas, typical of many festivals and processions in Kerala, and elsewhere in India. Someone held a yellow flag decorated with the keys

of St Peter and name of the church, and a priest held a candle. Both of these items were to be carried at the front of the pilgrimage party. Additionally, there was the "decorated chariot". This is actually a van which is enclosed in ornately painted wooden panels with coloured lights and red and gold motifs which is reminiscent of a fairground vehicle. It carries a public address system - which is used for playing music, and for making announcements. Other necessary equipment (first aid kit and the like) can be transported inside. The panel at the back of the vehicle carried a large portrait of Mar Ignatius Elias III, the Patriarch honoured by the pilgrimage. A few people wore large rosettes which declared their status as volunteers, having an organising role in the pilgrimage. I shall now describe the pilgrimage journey, using the present tense henceforth to convey some of the character of the event as lived experience.

## The Journey

It is time to depart and the pilgrimage sets off down the road. People fall rapidly into a fairly narrow line, mostly men towards the front and women behind. At first, there are quite frequent stops. There are many churches in this area which are considered to warrant brief stops for the pilgrims. Any announcements can be made to the assembled pilgrims at this time and the local priest leads a short prayer. Additionally there are wayside shrines, crosses at junctions or beside the road, dedicated to popular saints, and often a brief prayer is said by a priest here. These brief stops are convenient points for the offering of refreshments - volunteers will stand beside the road with large bowls of bananas, biscuits or sweets, tables of cold drinks or black coffee, to be handed to the pilgrims as they pass. Especially in areas where there are many Jacobite churches, such as at the beginning of the pilgrimage, the journey is frequently punctuated by such stops. For example, there is a short ascent to a large modern chapel which stands adjacent to the Bishop's House. Prayers are said briefly. (A prayer session is not in itself especially relaxing as shoes must be removed before entering each church and prayers are said standing in typical Orthodox style.) The party moves on to the church of a neighbouring parish. Here there are prayers, refreshments - coffee and slices of bread and bananas - a short rest and more pilgrims join the party, adding their own flag and vehicles. Afterwards the pilgrims walk on, sometimes on busy roads and sometimes on quiet lanes. Organising priests warn people to walk in single file so as not to disrupt traffic.

The sun rises higher in the sky and it starts to become warm. At every stop, I try to make conversation with some people, either fellow pilgrims or volunteers helping out, sometimes the priest. I am already acquainted with a number of the churches visited early on, as they are among the celebrated holy sites of the Jacobites. One of these would, in other years, have been Kandanad Church. It is an old and impressive building, famous for the tomb of a Catholicos, buried here in 1764. Such a senior bishop would be ranked second only to the Patriarch. The tomb of another Catholicos, Mar Basilios Eldho at Kothamangalam, comprises the most important Jacobite pilgrim centre in Ernakulam District. But we pass only near to the church and stop for prayers and refreshments in a small modern chapel. The main church is inaccessible because it is disputed between the two sections of the Orthodox community. There is an arrangement to alternate access to the inside of the church week by week - this is not the week of the Patriarch side. To ignore this fact would risk serious confrontation, maybe prosecution.

Further on we reach Perumpally Church, famous for its association with Mar Gregorios of Parumala. A much loved figure, he is venerated as the one Kerala-born saint of the Jacobite/Orthodox tradition. He was born and studied near here. The church gained fame as a place of healing under its former priest, who now serves as His Grace Geevarghese Mar Gregorios (Jacobite) Bishop of Kottayam. He established a popular "Jerusalem Chapel" filled with relics and mementoes gathered on pilgrimage in the Holy Land. It is at Perumpally, by the modern enlarged church, that the pilgrims are served *kanni* (rice gruel) for breakfast.

After Perumpally, there is a brief stop at Mulanthuruthy Church. This is an important pilgrimage destination in its own right, the tombs of several bishops from the Middle East are here. This was the site of an important synod in 1876, which reorganised the Church and strengthened its connection with the Patriarch at the time of dispute with the reformers, who subsequently formed the Mar Thoma Church (i.e. Syrian Protestant denomination). This was a pivotal event in the history of the Jacobites. As with quite a number of the other important churches, its control is disputed. There is much at stake here - the ancient church and tombs of course, but also the attached property and revenue of the church. Here the Patriarch side outnumbers the Catholicos side by some 4:1 (as determined by a referendum in the 1980s). The weeks are divided between the two sides again, but in proportion to the strength of each side. In this way an uneasy truce has been achieved. Access to many churches is similarly shared. The agreements are typically reinforced by court order. Unfortunately, disputes can still arise over the conducting of funeral services, the need for which can obviously not be made to follow such premeditated schedules. Violence has sometimes occurred, for instance if partisans of one group try to prevent the other side gaining access to the churchyard. As the pilgrimage party passes through Mulanthuruthy Church, by this time numbering many people, it can be seen both to honour and celebrate the holy sites of the Jacobite tradition, and also to comprise a show of strength, a very visible and audible assertion of their right to enter into and worship in the church.

By now it is quite hot, and the number of people in the group can slow progress, for instance on entering or leaving a church, or when the line of pilgrims passes a refreshment spot where someone is handing out drinks or fruit. I look around at my fellow pilgrims, both men and women of all ages, small children as well as others who must be in their seventies. By now most are covering their heads with white towels, as protection against the sun, so that both in front of me and behind there



stretches a long line of people, of varying height and stature, but all topped with white cloth, in some way perched on the head.

We walk on to Arakunnam and enter a church set back from a very spacious forecourt. Here we are given lunch - hundreds of packets of boiled rice, topped with vegetable curry, wrapped in banana leaf and made into a newspaper-covered parcel. These have been prepared by numerous volunteers of the area who hand them to the pilgrims as they arrive. People sit on steps, or in groups on towels or newspapers on the ground, and consume their lunch. It is time for a welcome break of one or two hours in the heat of the day. People chat or doze or watch more parties of pilgrims arrive, heralded by yellow flags, coloured umbrellas and red banners, from neighbouring parishes.

During the afternoon's walking, fewer stops are made. We proceed in a south-easterly direction. It is one of Ernakulam District's more important roads, but traffic is light. Sometimes we have to stop for no apparent reason; is it to let buses pass or because we are getting ahead of schedule? Once or twice this is uncomfortable, the pace slows but the temperature remains high. We pass on, through the villages, past mile after mile of paddy fields, dotted with coconut trees, sometimes through darker and refreshingly cool areas planted with rubber trees. Sometimes people chat, but as often they walk on, with time to watch the landscape roll by and think on matters spiritual or mundane, or just to walk and think about nothing at all.

By late afternoon it has become slightly hilly. We are approaching Piravom. There is a delay at one point and we wait. Someone says this is because at the junction ahead our party is merging with the pilgrims from Maneed. This is one of the principal starting points and is due north of Piravom, rather than to the north-west from where we have come. Maneed is the place from which the original pilgrimage of 1932 set out for Manjinikara. It will be a large group including pilgrims from further north who will have set out on the previous day, or even before that.

We walk on again and arrive at Piravom. It is a welcome sight, partly because it indicates progress but also because it is very beautiful. Entering the town, you pass over a bridge which spans high over a wide river, the Muvattupula. The river stretches away to the left, where there is a sweep of dense green, of coconut and other trees, above the water, broken by a high and steep slope of whitewashed steps and terraces, above which sits the church. The line of pilgrims enters the church, for each individually to make a private prayer and offering, before passing out the other side. There is no extended stop. Many regard this church as especially holy, it is said to

have been visited by one of the three kings from the east who had travelled to the new-born Jesus in Bethlehem. Its status with regard to the Church dispute is similar to that of Mulanthuruthy, described earlier.

By now, walking is easier as it is approaching the cool of the evening. My assistant, Biju, travels back to Ernakulam for some luggage, before getting a bus which will take him southwards for a day or two resting at his uncle's house. For myself and the other pilgrims there is a long evening of walking ahead. Fortunately it is more comfortable at this time. Soon after leaving Piravom, we pass a "Welcome to Kottayam District" sign. This is an important landmark. We will be in Kottayam District for the next 48 hours. This District is more strongly associated with the Catholicos side; their headquarters is in the town of Kottayam. The light fades as we walk on into Kottayam District, and by the time we reach the town of Peruva, it is dark. Here there will be rest for an hour or two. The pilgrims know that this is the schedule, and they rapidly break up into groups. Many proceed to the church and receive rice packets and take rest there. Others are invited by members of the church to rest in their homes. Other pilgrims are already friendly with families in the town (from previous pilgrimage journeys) and they proceed directly to those houses. I am invited to join one such group.

We enter an attractive, Kerala style house (long, sloping tiled roof over a single storey) set back from the road, beside a small lane. The family welcome us warmly. There are introductions, catching up with news, discussing this year's pilgrimage. A few people come and go. Then it is time for some quiet rest, but it is all too brief as dinner is soon ready. It is rice, bread, vegetable curry and biscuits. After eating it is time to set out again. There is a problem - someone says that you must have a torch for night walking, as it is easy to fall. Lacking such an item, I am whisked away on a scooter to the main street of the small town where, to my surprise, a shop is located which is still open and has both torch and batteries. I am back at the house in time to say goodbye and join the other pilgrims as they resume the journey.

It is true that you need a torch to walk at night. It is very dark, and the road is uneven, with large holes in many places. You walk on and concentrate your gaze on the small area of the road surface, about two or three yards in front of your feet, which is illuminated by the torch. Sometimes there are houses which provide illumination, but they are widely spaced along this stretch of road. Sometimes you can walk near to one of the decorated chariots which proceed at little more than walking pace, their flashing coloured lights and cheerfully blaring devotional songs are a welcome alternative to the dark and the quiet. The pilgrims become more spread out in the

dark, on a curving undulating road, such that you become less aware of the other people. I am accompanied throughout this stretch by a friendly man from Karingachira. He is short and stocky, with a determined stride, and I am glad of his company, especially since I start to suffer pain in the knee.

It is a sticky, humid night, and I and my fellow pilgrims are growing tired. All you can do is take each step at a time. Talking is too tiring now. There are no breaks for prayers, just mile after mile of walking. Eventually there is a rest stop, in a town where we find a balcony above a shop on which to stretch out. Others sit beside the road and sip black coffee. The journey resumes, and each hour seems an exhausting challenge now. This is the pilgrimage as ordeal, as physical struggle. The pain in my knee becomes intense, especially going down a slope, when it is agonising. Others, also, are looking tired and awkward. There are one or two other rest stops, but we walk throughout most of the night. Distance travelled is hard to assess in the darkness. So, also, is the number of other pilgrims, until there is a halt in a town, when you can observe the slightly eerie sight of a silent town, shops closed and streets empty, filling up with a huge number of tired people, looking for a step or ledge on which to prostrate themselves for a brief period of rest and propping their heads against a towel or shoulder bag.

It is a long and tiring night. The pain from my knee worsens further, especially when there is a hill, however gentle the slope. I begin to wonder whether it will be possible to walk further. We pass a bend in the road, and I am struck by the sight of an illuminated statue ahead. It is a replica of Michelangelo's Pieta, Mary weeping and holding the dead body of Jesus. I had seen this statue before, travelling along the road by car, but not illuminated at night, its white surface shining brilliantly against the blackness. It is an intriguing and cheering sight. It is presumably associated with the nearby Catholic church; Jacobites eschew the use of three-dimensional images. I find myself telling the statue about the pain in my knee; "please, St Mary, remove it!".

We pass on into the night, staggering almost, watching for holes in the road. I have to say that within about an hour of issuing my heartfelt plea, I am feeling better. Soon the pain has gone from my leg altogether, and I am not bothered with it again during the pilgrimage, for which I am grateful. I do not describe this because I have a strong sense of its inherent significance, nor because I see it as self-evidently miraculous although I vividly recall it, but because I was struck by the fact that in conversations afterwards people often reported similar experiences during the pilgrimage. The fact that one encounters difficulty, pain and discomfort during the long hours of walking, but can persevere to overcome it, sometimes with a sense of recovery which feels

like a supernatural intervention, is for many people an essential feature of the pilgrimage experience.

We are, by now, travelling along the Main Central Road of Kerala which runs in a north-south direction through the state. It will be our path for most of the next two days. Eventually, I recognise the entrance to the Ettumanur temple, one of the famous Siva temples of Kerala. We are nearing Kottayam Town. The sky lightens and it is early morning. A large crowd has gathered near a school playground and I am glad when a companion tells me that we are nearly at Neelimangalam, our major stopping point of this part of the journey. We get up to walk the last kilometre or so. A middle-aged man notices me and says "this shows our loyalty to the Patriarch, our solidarity with our Patriarch - no-one can question it, no one can judge it". He is rebuking those who show insufficient loyalty and, furthermore, is dismissing the significance of legal battles and court rulings, such as one impending from the Supreme Court, in such a matter as spiritual authority. In fact, his remark sums up the significance of this pilgrimage to the Jacobites as a community. We reach Neelimangalam with the sun rising already. Pilgrims go to the church or to neighbouring houses as at Peruva. A companion takes me down some lanes beyond the church. It is the house of one of the church's trustees. I am too exhausted to notice where I am going and to exchange more than brief greetings. People curl up in some chairs or on the floor; I am asleep almost immediately.

On waking, I find that it is nearly lunchtime. People are chatting or resting or getting washed. A priest, one or two pilgrims and myself are served lunch at an adjacent dining area. It is "Kerala meals" with the typical boiled rice and vegetable curries served on a section of banana leaf. Everyone is saying, with evident relief, that today is the "easy" day. After lunch we wander back to the church. There is an enormous line of pilgrims waiting to be served lunch there, a partly constructed parish hall contains a crowd of volunteers who are boiling up enormous piles of rice in large vats. We follow a back road past the church so as to join the main road at a point where we can see the start of the pilgrimage line.

There is a wait as pilgrimage leaders get ready for departure. In time the line arrives, led by a few priests in black cassocks, with a cross held aloft. Then come dozens of yellow flags for each of the different parishes, followed by the long, long line of pilgrims. Today we are walking a fairly short distance only, but it is symbolically significant. Kottayam Town is regarded by many as the capital of the Syrian Christians. All of the main Churches have a bishop here; the seminary and headquarters of all the Orthodox Christians was here before the split over the

Catholicate. We are to walk slowly and proudly into the busy centre of Kottayam, an army of Jacobite pilgrims parading their numerical strength and commitment.

It is a slow but enjoyable walk into the town centre. The pilgrims are refreshed, there is enthusiastic singing of popular devotional songs, as well as some chatting and joking. We are heading for Puthenangadi, for long a neighbourhood of Kottayam dominated by Syrian Christians [and described by Susan Visvanathan (1993) in her book]. We pass through the busy square at the centre of the town, and by the time we reach Puthenangadi it is dark. Some pilgrims enter the Simhasana Church (i.e. a church directly under the Patriarch, with a different constitution from a parish church). There are many houses here where pilgrims are welcomed as guests. A friend shows me to one such house although we are momentarily lost in the dark before locating it. We are warmly welcomed, and given dinner, after which there is relaxation and chatting. The house has a flat roof, and many pilgrims sleep on it. I am honoured by being shown to a wide bed, where I sleep alongside a priest from a parish near to Ernakulam. This stopover is significant because it is hosted by a family of "the other side", they belong to the Catholicos party, as is evident from the portraits of bishops in their main room. Our host points this out to me but emphasises that kindness should be shown to the pilgrims and "one's fellow human beings". [Visvanathan (1993) 243-6 has some discussion of the Manjinikara pilgrimage from the perspective of those offering hospitality in Kottayam].

The next morning we get up before five o'clock to wash and dress. Everyone stands in the main room, facing east, and our priest says morning prayers. Some of the pilgrims leave immediately, to join the front of the line. We sip tea for a few minutes before setting out for a road junction slightly to the south of the town centre. We see the Bishop of Cochin leave a hotel opposite the junction, some pilgrims go forward to receive his blessing. The sun rises as we wait. Someone comments that the "Malayala Manorama", Kerala's most widely read newspaper, carries a photograph of me in its coverage of the pilgrimage. The attention is flattering, perhaps, but it is somewhat opposed to my intention to be, as nearly as possible, a typical pilgrim. Favourable publicity for the pilgrimage, especially commenting on the popularity of the occasion, the number of people seeking the Patriarch's intercession, is of course welcomed by participants and organisers.

In the murky light of early morning, the front of the pilgrimage line reaches our junction. I notice some familiar faces, and I am struck again by the number of yellow flags, and by the fact that a few of them are being proudly carried by Hindu women. The religious identity of some women is evident from their dress - the use of a white

half-sari and coloured shirt being unlikely for Christian women who wear full sari or white on white, especially for church-related occasions. The majority of pilgrims are Jacobites, certainly, but a significant number of Hindus will join as well. They participate in the hope of obtaining blessings of spiritual or mundane kind. They appreciate, in addition, the sociability of the occasion and the provision of free refreshments and meals. Mostly, the Hindus are from lower castes, Izhava or so-called scheduled caste, but there are a few from higher castes as well.

We walk with the other pilgrims, at times quite slowly as the line must avoid obstructing traffic. It is early morning on one of the main roads through the state. It is a hot day, but the road is flat and progress is steady. People tell me about their hopes for the pilgrimage, the blessings which might be bestowed through the Patriarch's intercession. These concern searching for a job, or financial difficulties, or health problems of the pilgrim or someone in the family. By mid-morning we are in Chingavanam. This is the heartland of the Knanaya community, a strictly endogamous subsection of Syrian Christians. According to tradition, they migrated as a single group from the Middle East in 345 AD under one Thomas of Cana and have sought to maintain their distinctiveness ever since. They have their own bishop, and separate diocese, within the Jacobite community. I notice that their pilgrimage party sets off separately and walks on the other side of the road in what looks like a structural opposition to cheer the anthropologist. We soon stop to rest and are given lunch in the home of a Knanaya family, a short walk from their church.

The afternoon is again hot, as we proceed due south to Changanacherry, the next main town. The line moves quite slowly and it is possible to take short rests and easily rejoin some minutes later. I am determined to walk the full distance. At one point, however, my friend Shaji, driving a pilot car, insists that I should take a few minutes inside the car to see the extent of the line of pilgrims. The pilot vehicles patrol up and down, checking that there are no problems and also carrying messages. We drive up to the front of the line, turn around and head back to the other end. We stop occasionally to take a photograph. People are mostly walking single file to avoid obstruction to traffic, sometimes in pairs. The length of the line is astonishing, it must be at least ten kilometres long, perhaps fifteen. Every few hundred yards is a decorated vehicle playing the by-now familiar pilgrimage songs, as well as people carrying crosses and flags. This is the pilgrimage at its most impressive, perhaps, on the slow straight march into the busy town of Changanacherry.

After passing through Changanacherry without stopping, we go on southwards towards Thiruvella as the light begins to fade. As we approach Thiruvella, a

"Welcome to Pathanamthitta District" sign is a welcome sight, this is the district of our destination. We are passed by a march organised by the youth section of the Salvation Army, publicising the dangers of drugs. They have come from Alwaye, even further than us. I reflect that Jacobites ("Northists") walk down the left hand side of the road, the Knanaya over on the right, whilst the Salvation Army goes down the middle. As we enter the town we pass vehicles from nearby churches handing out rice packets. On the main street I see Biju waiting for me. I join him for dinner and a few hours rest which is included in the schedule. He has got a spare shirt for me.

At midnight the pilgrims set out again. It is to be a second night of walking. As we wander through the church before departure, I am gratified to hear one man saying to his son "Look, the foreigner", referring to me, "isn't having any problems". Fortunately this is now true. Although the night is again long and tiring, the road is flat and straight and I am able to manage a good pace. I chat to people about the pilgrimage as a process of renewal of faith, and also as an opportunity to renew social ties with other members of the Jacobite community, especially for people who have moved away from their family neighbourhood. Kurien, a friend from Karingachira, comments that people keep walking, out of faith, even when in pain, even, in some cases, when physically handicapped.

There are short rest-stops during the night. Refreshments are offered by a social club in one small town in the early hours. Here I meet some of the veterans of the pilgrimage, those who have done it many times. A series of speeches by priests are made through the P.A. system. These remind people of the significance of the pilgrimage, but also use up time and so ensure that we do not reach the River Pampa too early, because pilgrims may try to get a boat crossing as a short cut, which could be dangerous in the hours of darkness. It is nearly light when we reach the river. A priest invites me to join him in the house in which he will be taking rest. It requires a slight detour and we are asked to clamber inside a decorated vehicle which somehow finds the house. Again there are brief introductions and chatter about the pilgrimage, before I stretch out and fall asleep.

A few hours later I am wakened for lunch. People wash at taps or in the river and take meals. Our hosts are members of the Mar Thoma Church, the rival party in the dispute of the nineteenth century, but now friendly. Their community has a strong presence in this part of the state. Then we set out for the last leg of the journey. We watch a party of bicycle-pilgrims pass, yellow flags fluttering from the handle-bars. The front of our line of walking pilgrims passes and we join the group. It is a quieter

area, and more scenic with paddy fields around small hillocks covered with coconut, arecanut and other trees.

At two o'clock there is an hour of silent prayer. This marks the actual time at which the Patriarch died. We walk on solemnly. After an hour the singing begins again and there is excited conversation. We are nearing the destination. There is a tea stop and more walking as the sun begins to lower. We come almost to a halt. We are standing in an apparently interminable queue, but it is pleasant because it is now the cool of evening. Coloured umbrellas decorate the sides of the road - we are approaching Omalloor, the town adjacent to Manjinikara. A huge temporary archway stretches over the road carrying a banner which says "Welcome to Manjinikara Pilgrims". Beneath it people refresh themselves at a drinks stand.

Omalloor is full of yellow banners and an air of excitement. There are one or two more kilometres between the paddy fields which we traverse until we spot a small hillock with the sun just disappearing behind the trees on top. There are parked buses, some buildings, more banners and, suddenly, endless crowds, moving in all directions. A short ascent, and ahead we see Manjinikara Church. People are pushing towards it, others on either side stare at the exhausted pilgrims. We wander by the side of the church and glance in, a seething mass of bodies can be seen through a window, crushing against the Patriarch's tomb. Our first priority is to find somewhere to sit. We find a place by an annexe of the church. There we can rest and reflect that we have arrived. We have completed the journey.

After a short rest, there is time to wander about and then pay our respects at the tomb by saying prayers and petitions, kissing the corners and putting offerings in the box. We watch the vast sea of other pilgrims, many exhausted, but others not - they might be locals, they might have come by bus. People are having refreshments, resting and chatting - spread out over a large stretch of dry, dusty land beyond the church. At the far end of this area, away from the church, people are congregating for the end of pilgrimage meeting. A large, decorated platform is being occupied by bishops and a few other dignitaries, including politicians and prominent organisers of the pilgrimage. There is a visiting monk from Syria. Speeches are being made, at this point about the need to improve Sunday School facilities, the need for finances, teachers and teaching materials.

As the light fades, the meeting gets fully under way. The subject moves onto the pilgrimage itself, its recognition of Mar Ignatius Elias III as a saint, in effect a martyr for the faith. The pilgrimage expresses the importance of commitment to the throne



of Antioch. Certificates are awarded to individuals who have been prominent in organising the pilgrimage. The presentations continue, with speeches from dignitaries underlining the fame and prestige which this pilgrimage has attained. Night falls and artificial illumination is required.

A friend tells me that there are no houses which can provide accommodation nearby; the few facilities which exist on the site will be used by visiting bishops and other clergy. Someone will drive me to a nearby hotel, he says. I protest that I can just sleep out with the other pilgrims, but they are adamant and I am too exhausted to protest further. I am put into a car which weaves around the line of decorated chariots and drives into the darkness. After a kilometre or two we stop by a hotel, but there is dismay because it appears to have stopped serving dinner. Would I mind getting on that bus for a few kilometres to try another hotel? I agree, but I end up staying further from Manjinikara than I intended, although I am grateful for a meal and a good bed.

In the morning, according to the schedule, mass will be celebrated three times, at about five, seven and nine o'clock. I have difficulty reaching Manjinikara again from the hotel and first mass has already concluded. I miss a short procession of the yellow flags around the church after which many of the pilgrims disperse. We attend the second mass, relayed to the crowds outside the church by closed circuit television. It is celebrated by the Syrian Orthodox Bishop of Australia. It is a long service of the Jacobite tradition, sung with attention and vigour. Afterwards, I chat to more pilgrims about their experience of the journey - some I recognise from church festivals elsewhere. People disperse and the crowd thins. I buy some pilgrimage souvenirs - a picture of the saint, a cassette of pilgrims' songs. Then it is time to get a lift home. Everyone is tired, but there is satisfaction at having completed the pilgrimage. The quiet is welcome after the bustle and crowds of the last few days, but so also is the sense of having participated in something significant, of having shared, in some way, in the commitment and faith of so many people.

## Themes that arise from the pilgrimage

The Manjinkara pilgrimage is an extremely important community event for the Jacobites. By walking to the tomb of Mar Ignatius Elias III, the only Patriarch of Antioch buried in Kerala, regarded as a saint and martyr for the faith, the pilgrims can be said to express their respect for the Patriarchy itself. To be a Jacobite is to acknowledge the supremacy of the Patriarch. It is almost a defining characteristic of being a Jacobite that one is motivated to make this pilgrimage. One should say "almost" because there will be some Jacobites who are not able to make the journey or are not interested in a visit even by motor transport, but many, many of the faithful do come. And it is striking that the pilgrimage serves to reinforce and display the solidarity of the Jacobite community, their commitment to the Patriarch, whilst at the same time addressing the needs of individual pilgrims. People come out of a sense of personal devotion to the Bawa and in the hope that prayers will be answered. They come in thanksgiving for blessings which have been received, and out of a desire for spiritual advancement. The pilgrimage both makes a statement for and about the Jacobite community, and is also incorporated into the private agendas of the thousands of men and women who choose to do it. Quite a significant minority of these pilgrims are not Jacobites at all, which highlights the dual aspect of the pilgrimage - the public statement and the private quest.

The popularity of this pilgrimage must arise from several factors. As mentioned, it is the only tomb of a Patriarch in Kerala. It also is the tomb of a man who visited Kerala within living memory, which may mean that he is a saint with whom people feel they can form a spiritual relationship. There is no problem determining what he looked like, for example, as there is with some of the earlier bishop-saints. The details of his biography are known. And he is considered a martyr in the cause of peace, searching for a solution to the dispute that still rages in the Church. The significance of his visit, and then death, in 1932 can still be keenly appreciated.

Undoubtedly the pilgrimage has received much official encouragement from the hierarchy and so has come to be well-organised. Souvenir brochures are printed with messages from the present Patriarch. The pilgrimage travels through a substantial section of Central Kerala, passing through Ernakulam and Kottayam Districts and finishing in Pathanamthitta District. It is an extremely impressive spectacle as it passes down the Main Central Road of the state, and this ensures that it receives favourable publicity and confers prestige on the Church. This conveys the message that not only do many people have sufficient loyalty to the Patriarchy to make the pilgrimage but also, conversely, that many people, Hindus included, value and

benefit from the pilgrimage. This proves, it is said, the holiness of Manjinikara and the power of the Patriarch. The pilgrimage is an undertaking in which people both express and strengthen their faith and participate in a major social phenomenon.

Many different aspects of the pilgrimage are said to have a particular value. There are the discomforts and difficulties of the journey; the endurance of these is considered to be an offering to the saint of a particularly meritorious kind. There is gratitude and contentment if the difficulties, pain for example, cease to be a problem. There is the relief and joy of arrival. There is a sense of attainment, of having participated and completed. Throughout the pilgrimage there are prayers, public prayers in the churches, group prayers in people's homes before resuming the journey, as well as private prayers and contemplation whilst walking or at rest. Additionally there are the songs, which many people mention as being a memorable aspect of the pilgrimage. These are sung whilst on the road and there is the familiar set of tunes played by the decorated chariots. All of these make the pilgrimage a powerful experience, sometimes enjoyable, sometimes painful, sometimes solemn and sometimes light-hearted.

The Manjinikara pilgrimage is perhaps the main opportunity for the hierarchy of the Church to rally the faithful. There are occasional meetings and conventions elsewhere. Every few years there is "Patriarchal Day" - a huge procession, followed by a meeting of all participants, which explicitly expresses loyalty to the Patriarch. There was one in Ernakulam just two weeks after this pilgrimage, in fact. But, in general, the Manjinikara pilgrimage, with its opportunities for addressing pilgrims on the way and the platform speeches at the end, provides a key opportunity for the hierarchy to be seen, and to get a message across. This concerns the significance of the pilgrimage and the Patriarchy as noted, but it is also an opportunity to educate people in other matters - to recall a longer span of history and the importance of the Syrian connection, as well as the various holy places associated with it. The faithful can be alerted to the problems of the day, for example the need to improve Sunday School facilities, as we have seen, or the situation with regard to the legal battles in the courts. It provides a platform for friendly politicians, and also visiting clergy of the Syrian Orthodox Church of the Middle East or elsewhere. It is an opportunity for raising money, since offerings are made at the tomb and at holy sites along the way. The Church has constant ambitions for improving facilities, a large pilgrim centre is now planned at Manjinikara itself for example, so the importance of fund-raising could hardly be overstated.

Earlier, in discussing Kandanad and Mulanthuruthy and other disputed churches, we noted that the pilgrimage can be said to make a statement about right of access, about legitimacy of worship at these places. These stops also educate the pilgrims in their history and affirm the sacredness of the holy places (including, perhaps especially, the disputed sites), underlining a sense of commitment to them. We saw, also, that the pilgrimage marches slowly and conspicuously into Kottayam, almost like an arriving army at the city which is regarded as the capital of the Syrian Christians, and the headquarters of the Catholicos side. The *yatra* (journey) acquires features of a *jatha* (march or demonstration), and people sometimes refer to it as such. In the process, the Jacobites gain a sense of a landscape dotted with holy places and laden with historical significance for them. The Jacobites feel that only they significantly value the Syrian connection, and hence the heritage and tombs associated with it. This is an impression that Jacobites would be proud to convey to Hindus, and other onlookers - that they are the really "Syrian" of the Syrian Christians.

The journey through Central Kerala creates a set of experiences which linger in the memory, both at home, and later when travelling on unconnected journeys. The pilgrim acquires personal associations with places ("this is where we stopped for lunch") and knowledge both factual (about the Knanaya in Chingavanam) or perhaps legendary (about one of the three kings visiting Piravom). These associations remind the pilgrim about Manjinikara when visiting quite different places, and heighten a sense of the sacred connectedness of the landscape. In fact, the pilgrimage experience strengthens a whole set of symbolic associations which are likely to be retained in the participant's memory. These concern objects that are kept, oil from lamps near the tomb (said to have curative properties) or souvenir pictures or badges which indicate the home parish, worn by many pilgrims. Additionally, there are associations with other symbolic objects, the decorated chariots with the Bawa's portrait (akin to the Hindu practice of transporting gods on a chariot), the yellow flags, decorations and banners along the way.

An interesting issue is how far the pilgrimage effects social transformation amongst those involved. In the opening chapter we explored Turner's hypothesis that the attainment of a state of intensified social bonding, freed from the barriers and inhibitions of mundane, structured social existence, might be an important characteristic of pilgrimage. This is his "communitas". It seems to me that the pilgrims to Manjinikara certainly gain some sense of solidarity, a community of Jacobites expressing a shared commitment. This might be especially important for participants who come from parishes where they are not numerically strong. But not

all pilgrims are Jacobites, and it would be inappropriate to argue that the pilgrimage shows the emotional intensity or anti-structural quality of Turner's existential *communitas*. Hierarchy is maintained - bishops, priests and prominent lay organisers maintain their authority. To the extent that being involved in organisation of the pilgrimage allows exercise of power, confers prestige and possibly binds together a prominent elite, it could be said to reinforce hierarchy (contra Turner). There is formation of social ties - friendships with other pilgrims, with those who offer hospitality on the way, including, significantly some who are "on the other side". Contacts can be renewed, or bonds strengthened during the pilgrimage. These are significant social processes but do not seem to warrant the label "*communitas*", at least not "existential *communitas*". The fact that the pilgrimage is officially said to be one in which shared devotion is expressed, and a high level of solidarity achieved amongst Jacobites may, however, warrant use of the term "normative *communitas*".

The emergence of existential (subjectively felt) *communitas* seems to me unlikely where a pilgrimage involves such constant, lengthy, journeying and therefore a sense of hurry and tiredness much of the time. People lack the energy for vigorous social interaction and seem more likely to draw support from those whom they already know. It was not particularly apparent that people mixed across religious (or denominational) divisions and this weariness is probably part of the reason. There might be some, muted prejudice against Hindus of low caste, though the behaviour of pilgrims is usually considerate, and respectful.

Stories are told concerning occasional problems of violence between pilgrims and onlookers in the past. At the height of the tension between the Patriarch and Catholicos sides in 1975, it is said that there was some stone-throwing and even an attempt by someone to poison pilgrims by adding poison (fertiliser?) to water in which they were bathing and washing. The culprit was said to have been on his way to burial, having recently died, when the pilgrimage passed by the next year. The threat of problems may have encouraged the hierarchy to organise and patrol the pilgrimage more carefully from the mid-seventies on. But now it takes place quite peacefully.

The process of giving, of making an offering, is important during the pilgrimage. This involves the offerings made by pilgrims and also those made to pilgrims. They give money at Manjinikara and at many stops along the way, and they are also given money by onlookers on the understanding that it will be offered at the end. This process of handing money to the pilgrims as they pass expresses support, and a shared sense of respect for the Bawa. It also parallels the giving of refreshments and

hospitality to the pilgrims, which is considered meritorious for those who give and conveys the goodwill of those along the way (who may not be Jacobites). Many people make offerings of money or refreshments.

The pilgrimage is also considered, in an important sense, an offering of oneself - an undertaking to endure the difficulties of the journey and exert oneself for the Patriarch. The exercise of qualities of self-sacrifice and courage is not only considered beneficial in itself, it can also be said to comprise an emulation of the Patriarch, who is said to have displayed great courage and self-sacrifice in visiting Kerala at a time when travel was more difficult and at a fairly advanced age, subsequently subjecting himself to the ordeal of trying to make peace. Furthermore, the strength of his devotion to the flock, and the degree of his suffering for it, testify to the concern he will still have to mediate and pray for us now, according to Jacobite theology.

It is, of course, the intercession of the Patriarch on their behalf which is considered by pilgrims to secure blessings and to help resolve problems in their lives. This is the reason that the pilgrimage matters to participants at a personal level. Even if they understate any desire for tangible benefit, pilgrims will mention the benefits of spiritual advance, a sense of being "at peace" after the pilgrimage, earning the goodwill of the saint. Certainly many pilgrims pray about specific problems or desires. In addition, however, for many the time for prayer and reflection is itself valuable. There is also the inspiration provided by other pilgrims, perhaps the old or handicapped. There may be a wish to imitate those who come the furthest, or with greatest regularity year after year. And there are the stories people tell of blessings received, miracles experienced. All of these give encouragement to the pilgrims. The sense of doing something - taking a problem to someone - strengthens the hope of the faithful.

There are many stories of healings. They are difficult to investigate because they are not recorded or researched as by Catholics at Lourdes, for example. One is often told about ailments which are somewhat vague - abdominal pains, swellings, skin irritations. Clearly retrospective diagnosis is not possible, and therefore no assessment of psychosomatic influences, likelihood of spontaneous recovery and so forth can be made. The important point to note in the present context is the frequency and conviction with which such occurrences are reported. From the standpoint of faith, many healings occur. This fact is important because it means that the pilgrimage provides an opportunity for seeking healing within the Jacobite tradition. Pilgrim centres are, to a degree, in competition with each other. If people's needs are

not met at Jacobite sites they may go elsewhere. Parumala is a popular pilgrim centre, and venerated by Jacobites, although it is under the control of the Catholicos-side. Others might go to centres of charismatic worship, Catholic or Protestant, or even to Hindu destinations such as Sabarimala - which would be frowned on by the hierarchy.

In some cases, making a pilgrimage may make a statement of commitment and intent which has a clear psychosocial significance. Undertaking a pilgrimage for relief from emotional problems, to overcome alcoholism, for cessation of marital or family disharmony, not only indicates resolve, but alerts others to the need for, and intention to achieve, change. If a pilgrimage is undertaken when birth of a child is desired, when a job is sought, when a new project is undertaken, the journey can advertise the fact to a social group, perhaps, but in a manner which is discreet and sincere. A couple may undertake a pilgrimage together to pray for a child, a family may go together if there are psychological, financial or any other difficulties. The joint undertaking of pilgrimage communicates resolve, shared commitment and a joint search for resolution by each of those involved. Some pilgrims undertake a pilgrimage for someone else who is too sick to travel, or elderly, or working away. A woman who travels each year for her husband who has a heart condition expresses her love, hope for the future and gratitude for his preservation as well as an intention to shoulder some of the burden of the problem. Other relationships can be affirmed simply by pledging to pray for someone at Manjnikara. Some of the healings might be considered to be "mediated" by social influence - "suggestion", some kind of subconscious imitation. Whatever the case, the perception of the pilgrimage as a healing and life-enhancing event certainly has profound social consequences. We will explore some of these issues further in the sections on phenomenology.

One should not lose sight of the importance of pilgrimage as an expression of gratitude, as mentioned earlier. It can encourage an attitude of appreciating, and expressing one's esteem for, positive features of life. For many, just as the pilgrimage may be an opportunity to pray over all the various problems and anxieties of their life, so, equally, it is an opportunity to reflect gratefully on the good things. In this way pilgrims may feel that it is inappropriate, in conversation, to single out any one particular thing as a perceived blessing, but will say "many things" or "all these good things". There is no doubt that taking a young child on pilgrimage as an expression of gratitude for their birth is very common. Male children considered to be a pilgrimage-blessing will often be called Elias, after the Bawa.

Some express the view that praying for blessings encourages an acquisitive, bargaining attitude to religious practice. They may say that it encourages an excessively anthropomorphic conceptualisation of divinity, handing out favours through intermediaries like the patronage of a lofty politician. This point has been made for Sri Lanka by Obeyesekere (1963) for example. It is difficult not to see some resemblance between the multiple cults of saints which seek supernatural benefits and the earthly sphere of seeking and bestowing favours within a cumbersome bureaucracy. Pilgrims who are sensitive to the possibility of such criticism will tend to emphasise spiritual development as the key benefit of pilgrimage. A typical point of view, however, would be an acknowledgement that pilgrims may be undeserving and sinful, not possessing the best motives or spiritual purity, but that they are remarkably fortunate because they have a compassionate and effective (because very holy) mediator. This is the saint, the Bawa at Manjinikara.

In addition to this, one must add that for many participants the pilgrimage is fun. It has enjoyable, even slightly ridiculous, aspects, as well as the serious and spiritual. It is a spectacle and it is an excursion for friends and family. It is something for people to do, to be involved in, to look forward to - whatever their situation, whether they are very busy, unemployed or retired. The pilgrims, and Jacobite community generally, are certainly heartened that the pilgrimage grows in scale each year, always with more participants. This could mean that it eventually becomes unmanageable. At the moment, however, people are impressed by the sense of occasion and they are appreciative of the opportunity it affords to make a regular commitment to renew their faith.



## **The Impact of Manjinikara on other Pilgrimages**

The Manjinikara pilgrimage is the most important of the symbolically-elaborated walking journeys of the Jacobites. This does not mean that Manjinikara can be called, unequivocally, their most important 'pilgrim centre'. Two other locations rival it as pilgrim centres, Kothamangalam in Ernakulam District and Manarcad, near to Kottayam Town. The importance of Manjinikara lies in the fact that the ritualized walking journey to the Patriarch's tomb makes an extremely powerful socio-political statement on behalf of the Jacobites. At the same time it permits individuals to address concerns of their own, hoping to gain spiritual benefit and receive blessings in their lives.

At Kothamangalam, the tomb is said to be that of a Catholicos, a prelate nearly equal in standing to the Patriarch. It is much older than that at Manjinikara, dating from 1685 (Babu Paul 1985). It has long been a famous pilgrim centre, with notable processions and other festivities to commemorate the holy man. Kothamangalam is a prosperous town, well located on a main trading route between the port at Cochin and the high ranges of the Western Ghats. Visitors often stop to give offerings whilst going about their other business. But it has only been in the wake of the success achieved by the Manjinikara pilgrimage, as Jacobites often pointed out to me, that the journey to Kothamangalam has acquired renewed significance, with the degree of enthusiasm and organisation which it now displays.

Manarcad, by contrast, whilst being a site of immense popularity, especially with women, including many Hindu women, is not associated with a pilgrimage journey. The fame of the site derives from its possession of a miraculous portrait of St. Mary with the infant Jesus. This is opened to view, behind the altar, on only one day a year. In addition, the church now has a small piece of cloth, reputed to be part of the girdle of St. Mary, which was donated by the Patriarch in 1982. Instead of a symbolic journey, Manarcad is associated with a vigil, during which people camp out in the church grounds for up to a week, praying to St. Mary through most of the day and night. This occurs at the start of September each year.

It is through this expression of devotion, with the endurance of some discomfort, that worshippers at Manarcad hope to strengthen their relationship with St. Mary. She is thought to have great power to assist with problems concerning health, finances, lost property and other matters. Since there is no tomb here, a pilgrimage journey could not acquire characteristics associated with a funeral procession, as for the other

principal pilgrim centres. Manarcad is the "odd one out" amongst Jacobite holy sites. [Visvanathan (1993):217-232 has a discussion of the vigil at Manarcad.]

The destinations of Jacobite and Orthodox pilgrimages all recall key figures in the history of the Church in Kerala. Parumala, which is located quite near to Manjinikara, is notable for the fact that it can be said to have become a parallel, in some respects a rival, saint's cult. Mar Gregorios passed away here in 1902, so the tomb is thirty years older than that at Manjinikara (Thomas 1977, Iype 1981). However, although Mar Gregorios is revered as their one local-born saint by all Jacobite and Orthodox Christians, the site is under the control of the Catholicos, not the Patriarchal side. Whilst its significance as a site to visit has been long established, the practice of making organized pilgrimage journeys has been most actively promoted in the last ten to twenty years, partly in response to the success of the Manjinikara pilgrimages.

It is of considerable interest that the Catholicos-party Orthodox now actively encourage walking pilgrimages of an elaborate, eye-catching type to Parumala. There is one which departs each year from Mulanthuruthy, to the south-east of Ernakulam, in which I participated. It leaves at the end of October, taking three days to reach Parumala. These walking pilgrimages are effective in propagating the fame of the site by expressing devotion in a very public manner. They also enable the Orthodox to feel proud that they too have a site to which pilgrims will tramp many miles over Kerala's roads.

Both Jacobite and Orthodox are motivated to visit Parumala, but, since the dispute became bitter in the 1970s, only the latter have participated in the walking journeys. By contrast, pilgrimages to tombs of the Syrian bishops would now be regarded by many Catholicos-supporting Orthodox with some ambivalence. After all, they favour greater autonomy for their Church. In fact, some now stress the "Indianness" of their group (Kuriakose 1988), referring to themselves as the "Indian Orthodox Church" (Paulos Mar Gregorios 1982). In this respect, the cult of a local-born saint, as at Parumala, helps to reinforce their Indian credentials. It is sometimes said by them that other Christians, Catholics, Pentecostals, and, maybe, Jacobites, are too much under foreign influence, dependent on authority and finance from overseas. This is a point which is also made, it can be noted, by some Hindu nationalists. Whilst the Catholicos-party Orthodox are intent on investing large amounts to boost the prestige of their pilgrim centre - they are currently building an enormous new church at Parumala - they would see this as a thoroughly local venture, honouring a local saint within a distinctively Indian Christian tradition.

Ernakulam District is emphatically the heartland of the Jacobites. In part, this is because in this area there is a significant concentration of old churches containing tombs of foreign bishop-saints. These are considered to be locations of great sacred power, the importance of which derives from the Middle Eastern connection which is affirmed by the presence of the saint and, of course, cherished by the Jacobites. As at Kothamangalam, these sites have long attracted visitors, especially on commemoration days, but they have only more recently followed Manjinikara in acquiring elaborate walking pilgrimages. These are now organized to display the standard features - predetermined routes and stopping points, with decorated chariots, flags and loud devotional songs. They conspicuously draw attention to the cult of the saint in all the towns and villages which are passed through.

Each of the sites to which the Jacobite pilgrimage parties travel recalls a particular, critical stage in the convoluted history of the Church and the various disputes. Kothamangalam and North Paravur (the tombs date from 1685 and 1671 respectively) recall the period of revival of the Syrian rites and the (re-)establishment of the Antiochene connection after Catholicization by the Portuguese. Mulanthuruthy (the tomb here dates from 1874) recalls the battle with the reformers of the nineteenth century which eventually led to the formation of the separate Mar Thoma Church, the main Syrian Protestant denomination.

In addition to pilgrimages to tombs of Middle Eastern bishops, there are now, also, smaller pilgrimages which are gaining popularity for recent, prominent bishops of the Pro-Patriarchal side. There is a tomb at Alwaye, which dates from 1953, which is honoured in this way. However, it is currently inaccessible because it lies within a seminary now under the control of a bishop supporting the "other side". There are some Middle-Eastern bishops tombs of the eighteenth century which are honoured, but on a smaller scale. This may be because the eighteenth century was a confused period in Church history but also, especially at Kandanad, because the site is too contentiously disputed between the two sides in the Church quarrel.

Now that we have examined the most important Jacobite pilgrimage, to Manjinikara, and have discussed the fact that others, both Jacobite and Orthodox (Parumala), have expanded in its wake, we can go on to consider two pilgrimages from within Ernakulam District. Firstly, we will consider another Jacobite walking journey, this time to North Paravur. We will then contrast it with the enormously popular pilgrimage to the Catholic site of Malayattur, which has a quite different character.

## The Manjinikara Pilgrimage



Pilgrims gathered for departure photo outside Karingachira Church – Bishop in centre with hand-cross; Priest who presides over pilgrimage committee holds candle; other volunteers wear rosettes.



The front of the pilgrimage near Kottayam Town. Every participating parish is represented by a yellow flag; three priests and a garlanded cross held aloft lead the way.



## Manjinikara Pilgrimage (continued)



The long, long line of pilgrims passes down the Main Central Road of Kerala in the heat of the day.



At Manjinikara, the meeting which concludes the pilgrimage is about to get under way; bishops and other dignitaries gather on stage; the Church is to the back of camera.





#### Summary of Chapter four

Chapter four describes the most important of the Jacobite pilgrimages, which travels to Manjinikara, to the tomb of the only Patriarch of Antioch to be buried in Kerala. My fellow pilgrims and I travelled from Karingachira Church near Ernakulam, walking southwards for four days and two nights. There were frequent stops at churches on the way, including some which are disputed sites in the current Church quarrel. Throughout, we were accompanied by decorated chariots bearing portraits of the Patriarch as well as flags and crosses held aloft and, after a while, an astonishingly long line of other pilgrims.

Invariably during the journey, onlookers give refreshments and monetary offerings. Hospitality is offered to pilgrims, sometimes by supporters of the rival Orthodox group or members of other Churches. The pilgrimage passes through Kottayam Town, long regarded as the headquarters of the Syrian Christians. Some Hindus also participate. Many of the pilgrims experience pain and considerable fatigue but show determination to get through. On arrival, they kiss the tomb of the Patriarch and give cash offerings. They listen to speeches about the significance of the pilgrimage and the current concerns of the Church. Whilst some social bonding occurs it probably cannot be described as exemplifying "existential communitas". The pilgrimage is, above all, an expression of loyalty to the Patriarchy and a statement about right of access to disputed property. In addition, pilgrims can address their own personal concerns by praying for blessings. Other Jacobite pilgrimages proceed along similar lines. There are also, now, some similar well-organised pilgrimages travelling to Parumala, perhaps in response to the success of the Manjinikara journeys. Parumala is under the control of the rival Catholicos group.

## CHAPTER 5

### **THE TOMB OF THE SYRIAN BISHOP AND THE FOOTPRINT OF ST. THOMAS: A JACOBITE AND A CATHOLIC PILGRIMAGE**



## **Arranging to go on pilgrimage.**

During Easter 1995 I was busy in my neighbourhood in Ernakulam Town attending Christian services and celebrations. In Kerala, the Orthodox Easter occurs at the same time as the Catholic Easter - that is, both groups determine it according to the Gregorian calendar unlike many Orthodox elsewhere. This meant that the weekend was especially busy for me, as I wanted to attend both Orthodox and Catholic services. At the same time I was worrying about some forthcoming pilgrimages. The period after Easter would be especially hectic because pilgrimages of importance to both groups would be taking place. Some careful planning on my part would be required, and I gave some thought to this over the Easter weekend.

The Sunday following Easter Sunday, and the Sunday after that, are the two most popular days for making pilgrimage to Malayattur. This is a small mountain about one hour's drive from Ernakulam which is said to be the most popular Christian pilgrimage destination in Kerala. It belongs to the Syrian Catholics. I was eager to make a pilgrimage on both of the two principal Sundays, so that I could experience both a large group pilgrimage and a smaller-scale, private one. In the middle of the week between these two Sundays would take place the annual walking pilgrimage to North Paravur. This occasion is of considerable significance for local Jacobites. It commemorates the death of one Mar Gregorios, who was buried at North Paravur in 1671, a critical time in the history of the Jacobite community. I was therefore eager to participate in it in addition to making the two visits to Malayattur. Fortunately, none of these were especially long pilgrimages or requiring elaborate preparation.

The Malayattur and North Paravur pilgrimages contrast in some notable respects. In the present discussion I wish to consider some of the interesting differences which can emerge from comparing them. They make a fairly convenient pair to compare because they both occur at around the same time, and they are both located fairly near to Ernakulam town, within Ernakulam District. The district is, as we have seen, the Jacobite heartland. However, the additional presence of Malayattur considerably enhances the interest of the area from my point of view. It is not just the main Syrian Catholic pilgrim centre in the vicinity, but probably the most famous Christian pilgrim centre anywhere in the state. It belongs to the Syro-Malabar Church, which is the larger of the two Syrian Catholic Churches in Kerala. They both use a Syrian-derived liturgy whilst being in communion with Rome. In practice, Malayattur is

popular with almost all Christians as well as many Hindus and Muslims (Kaniamparambil 1989, D Daniel 1986).

It was inevitable that I should take some interest in Malayattur, not least because Jacobites are motivated to make the pilgrimage, and they talk about it as well as their own occasions. In addition, I wished to get a general insight into pilgrimage, in my area, including the similarities and differences between Jacobite pilgrimages on the one hand and principal Catholic and Hindu pilgrimages on the other. Almost all people have some awareness of the different types, if not necessarily direct experience of them. Whilst Jacobite pilgrimages are mostly restricted in their appeal to Jacobites themselves - though some Hindus participate - the most famous Catholic and Hindu pilgrimages, notably Malayattur and Sabarimala, have very broad appeal. In fact the parallel between these two is notable, such that Malayattur is often referred to as the "Christian Sabarimala". We will consider the Sabarimala pilgrimage in the next chapter.

During the Easter weekend preceding the pilgrimages I felt somewhat anxious. This was, in part, due to concern over the possibility of being exhausted by the busy schedule. In addition there was a problem with Malayattur. There simply did not seem to be organised group pilgrimages taking place from my neighbourhood as I had been led to expect. In this respect, the parallel with Sabarimala did not seem to hold since such groups had been everywhere during the season for that pilgrimage. Everyone claimed that a group pilgrimage must be planned from somewhere in the vicinity, but no one could say exactly where. Catholics of my acquaintance seemed to be opting for small privately arranged excursions, with their family or a few friends. At least I knew that it would be easy to arrange a visit of this type, but I had often been told that the group pilgrimages were of particular interest, hence my enthusiasm for participating in one.

My enquiries concerning groups to Malayattur revealed that the local Catholic youth group had organized such a party, but it had gone early in the season during Lent, when there are fewer pilgrims - and at a time when I had had to visit Trivandrum. With nothing forthcoming from my nearby Catholic churches, I contacted Edapally Church, our nearest Catholic pilgrim centre which is one or two miles up the road. They had organised a party, but it had visited on Good Friday, when I had been busy with "Way of the Cross" prayer services in my own neighbourhood.

There seemed to be no group pilgrimages planned for the Sundays following Easter, until one priest suggested that I contact the bus hire company which was most favoured by the Catholic churches. This yielded the valuable information that a bus load of pilgrims would be leaving from in front of my local Latin Catholic church on the Saturday following Easter, to be on the hill for the early hours of Sunday morning. It turned out, however, that the pilgrims would in fact be from St. Mary's Church, Ponnarimangalam, a Latin Catholic church on a small island a short distance across the water from our neighbourhood. I therefore participated in the pilgrimage, by departing from outside the local church, but with members of a parish with which I was not previously acquainted. However, I was glad of the chance to experience the group pilgrimage. Its members were considerate in their welcome for me, and I discovered that some of them worked in my neighbourhood in any case.

The important point to make about the relative difficulty in joining a larger pilgrimage group to Malayattur is not just that this contrasts with my experience for Sabarimala, but also that it contrasts sharply with the situation for North Paravur. The latter is a carefully organised and generally well publicised occasion, which occurs on only one day each year (small parties of pilgrims may go at other times). There are a number of more or less official starting points, at which pilgrims can join the group and start walking. I was acquainted with this routine from my participation in the Manjinikara pilgrimage in mid-February. The pilgrimages within Ernakulam District run along similar lines to the Manjinikara journey, as several friends had already explained to me. By contrast, the pilgrimage groups for Malayattur may leave at any time during the season. This includes Lent and two weeks after Easter. Their organization is far more impromptu and localized than for the Jacobites. Priests often seem uncertain about arrangements which might be made by laity, even within their own parish. There is no pre-determined route with points along the way where people may go to join in. At Malayattur pilgrims must ascend the mountain itself on foot, but most reach the base of the mountain by motor vehicle.

Malayattur lies beside the river Periyar to the north-east of Cochin. The Periyar is the main river of Ernakulam District. Some miles down-river is the town of Alwaye. This is where the main highway passes over the river as it stretches between Cochin to the south and Ankamali to the north. The Periyar divides at Alwaye, the main part ending in the wide river mouth at Kodungallur, where St. Thomas landed, the other passing by North Paravur somewhat to the south, before reaching the ocean. North Paravur is famous for its traditional association with St. Thomas. It has certainly had

very ancient Jewish and Christian communities living there. The ancient church, said to have been established by the apostle, is under the control of Catholics. As previously indicated, the more recent St. Thomas Church of the Jacobites is, for them, a major pilgrim centre because it contains the tomb of Mar Gregorios. I will present a description of the Jacobite pilgrimage to North Paravur, which is somewhat similar to the one to Manjinikara, before turning to a discussion of Malayattur, and the significant contrasts between the two. In fact, the North Paravur pilgrimage took place on the Wednesday, with a feast on Thursday, between the two Sundays of my Malayattur pilgrimages.

### **Walking to the tomb of Mar Gregorios.**

The pilgrimage was to depart from St. George's Church Karingachira. I had checked that pilgrims would be leaving from Karingachira with Varghese, who is himself a keen pilgrim. We had left from here for Manjinikara and would, later, to go to Kothamangalam. Departure was to be in the middle of the night, at 3.30 a.m. on April 26th.

I slept fitfully for a few hours that night in my room in Ernakulam - it was a humid night - and was ready to get into a pre-booked taxi at three o'clock. Karingachira is some miles to the south-east of the city and so a taxi was required because no public transport would be available so early. However, on arriving at Karingachira church we found no sign of Varghese. Fortunately we discovered him at his house nearby and he explained that the church was locked at this time so our small band of pilgrims would congregate by a wayside shrine a short distance up the road.

We were a small party of six gathered in front of the shrine. There were brief greetings and a few chanted prayers before departure. We were going to walk some ten kilometres to St. Mary's Church Pallikara. Many pilgrims would have gathered there already, resting overnight in the church. In particular, this included a significant number from Puthencruz, to the other side of Pallikara. To begin with, it was not an especially attractive area through which to walk as we followed a road stretching at length around Ambalamugal chemical refinery. However, it was agreeably tranquil, and even the yellow flame burning high above one of the furnaces seemed to have a mysterious quality at this hour. There were one or two chapels beside which we stopped briefly to offer a prayer and a coin before proceeding on, at a fairly brisk pace. There was conversation concerning mundane local matters, and sometimes silence. As we left the refinery behind, so we lost the benefit of artificial illumination. I was glad of my torch, especially when the road passed through rubber plantations where everything was extraordinarily dark.

The first signs of daylight were appearing in the sky as we came to a slope in the road, rising from the paddy fields towards a village. Immediately on the left was the church. Inside there were about fifty sleepy pilgrims. Some had slept in the church, others were arriving now, like ourselves. All stood to chant the morning's prayers, led by the priest, with the familiar lilting chant of Syrian Orthodox liturgy. Leaders of the pilgrimage were then blessed by the priest. One of them held a silver cross, which was garlanded, and another a large candle, about two feet in length, which was lit by the priest. These two items would be carried at the front of the pilgrimage

party. Most of the pilgrims then proceeded for a brief prayer in a side chapel. Here, they paid their respects to Mar Ignatius Elias III, the Patriarch of Antioch who is buried at Manjinikara. There is a bone relic of Mar Ignatius in the chapel at Pallikara. Outside, black coffee was served to all participants. By this time it was daylight, and time to depart.

All Jacobite pilgrimages follow a broadly similar pattern, with which I was now acquainted from previous journeys. On leaving a church people rapidly fall into line, mostly in single file. This is important because Kerala's roads are narrow (there are trees and homes everywhere) and often busy. For pilgrims to walk side by side would risk obstruction and possible injury. The volunteer organizers are careful to maintain an orderly character, partly because of traffic, but also to ensure a favourable impression on other people along the route.

At the front of the pilgrimage line is the "decorated vehicle". As we have noted, it is somewhat similar to the chariots which are a feature of processions at many Hindu temples. This similarity was reinforced by the presence of a large image, in this case of Mar Gregorios, placed beneath a golden cross on the front of the vehicle. It is always a painted portrait; the Orthodox do not favour three-dimensional images (in contrast to Catholics). Inside the vehicle a public address system is usually carried for making announcements and playing popular pilgrims' songs, often at formidable volume. Inside, there is also be a first aid kit, spare flags and banners and, sometimes, one or two exhausted pilgrims requiring rest. As soon as the pilgrims began to walk, the loud but encouraging sound of the devotional songs indicated that the pilgrimage was underway.

Behind the decorated vehicle the pilgrimage leaders usually walk, wearing large rosettes to indicate their volunteer status. They carry the cross and candle; others carry yellow flags, decorated with the crossed keys of St. Peter, considered the first Patriarch of Antioch, and sometimes bearing the name of the home parish. Often men and women are grouped separately as they would be in church, but no one enforces this. There is no particular garb for the pilgrims though many, especially older men and women, wear the traditional white of Kerala - mundu, shirt, blouse or shawl. White is always a respectable colour for dress, especially for Syrian Christians on church-related occasions.

The pilgrimage parties usually proceed at a steady, but unhurried pace. People of all ages take part. To begin with, on this occasion, the traffic was light on the roads, so

that people could walk in pairs and exchange conversation. This part of Ernakulam District is a fairly densely populated area, but houses are mostly well spaced out, with coconut, arecanut and banana trees everywhere to create the distinctive Kerala half-rural-half-suburban landscape.

After we had walked some kilometres from Pallikara it was time to stop at St. Mary's Jacobite Church at Thamarachal. This was the first of several church stops during the morning. Such stops enable pilgrims from each parish to join the group. Pilgrims say prayers and make coin offerings to show their respect at each church. St Mary's Thamarachal, for example, has a small piece of St. Mary's *sunooro*, or girdle, on display, which was presented by the Patriarch. As we have noted, there is such an item at the famous pilgrim centre at Manarcad, and some other churches dedicated to St. Mary. Priests have an opportunity to address pilgrims and explain to them the significance of each place, or of the whole event. The pilgrims, in turn, are given refreshments and are permitted a short rest. I tried to make conversation with fellow pilgrims, volunteers and often the local priest.

All participants in Jacobite pilgrimages are given a badge. This indicates the starting point of each pilgrim and carries a small picture of the saint, Mar Gregorios in this case. It can be said to acquire the status of a medal, which can be proudly shown to others at the destination or at home. One man who travels down from the Nilgiri region of Tamil Nadu made a point of showing some of his badges to me. He is a respected veteran of Jacobite pilgrimages, having participated as long as anyone else.

In the later part of the morning the character of the pilgrimage changed. A brief rest stop in a church marked the end of the quiet roads winding through the parishes to the east of Ernakulam; from now on we would be proceeding in a more westerly direction along the main highway from Perumbavoor to Alwaye. It was a long period of walking, without stops. It became very uncomfortable as the sun was at its fiercest, during the hottest time of the year, with no clouds or trees beside the road to provide protection. The pace slowed. Few people had energy for talking, they just plodded along, heads covered by towels, scarves or handkerchiefs, sometimes clutching bottles of water. There were no trees at all close to the highway, merely dust, fumes and noise. The pilgrimage party numbered several hundred people, a long column beside the road, a Jacobite army marching towards Alwaye.

All pilgrimages seem to require periods of ordeal. These remind the participant that the spiritual life, progressing towards the holy, is no easy matter. One must take up one's cross, according to the imagery of the Christian tradition. The exertion, the struggle, can be seen in the faces of the pilgrims both by other participants and by bystanders. But they walk on, determined to get through. This is the time when one can reflect on the purpose of pilgrimage, on one's hopes and goals in life and on the value of resolve, commitment or faith. This is when the anthropologist wonders why he is studying pilgrimage. Sensing this, Varghese was anxious that I drink sufficient water, and assured me that Mar Gregorios answers all prayers.

With some relief, we reached Alwaye. We entered the small Jacobite chapel dedicated to St. Mary. Here we were offered lunch, rice and vegetable curry, after which everyone prostrated themselves for rest. The pilgrims cannot enter St. Mary's *Church* at Alwaye because its control is disputed between the two sides in the Church struggle. This is a matter of great regret to the Jacobites, as a former bishop of the diocese, Paulos Mar Athanasius, is buried inside and he is honoured by a small pilgrimage of his own. He is regarded as a heroic leader of the Patriarch followers. However, the bishop currently residing at the site supports the Catholicos party. In 1978 there was a period of agitation over this because the Patriarch had appointed another bishop to oversee the diocese (the current Jacobite Bishop of Ankamali and Kothamangalam) following the breakdown of cooperation between the two sides. There were large-scale marches and sit-down protests, followed by many arrests and some violence. The Chief Minister of Kerala had to intervene, in the end permitting a one-off celebration of mass by the Jacobite Bishop, after which the church was locked to all.

In some respects, the arrival of the pilgrims at Alwaye recalls the marches and protests of the 1970s. But all the pilgrims can do is walk sullenly past the outside gate, perhaps gazing along the drive towards the disputed church and seminary as if to convey their displeasure to the embattled figure of the Catholicos-party Bishop. Interestingly, many of the participating pilgrims have come from Puthencruz, resident parish of the rival, Jacobite, Bishop before his elevation to the episcopacy, and an area staunchly loyal to him. These political meanings are effectively conveyed by the pilgrimage, but one should not assume that they are uppermost in the minds of all participants. They are not likely to matter much to the Hindus who participate, for example. In any case, the pilgrimage is conducted in an entirely peaceful manner.



The rest at Alwaye was certainly welcome after enduring the heat of midday. I managed to talk for a few minutes to the priest, whose father had been a priest here before him. On the wall of his room he had a picture with portraits of the worldwide Syrian Orthodox hierarchy - the Patriarch, bishops of the Middle East, India, Europe and the New World. Soon it was time to resume our journey. I watched the decorated chariot drive onto the road, followed by the orderly line of pilgrims. The party easily attracted attention in the busy town, not least because we were reinforced by a second decorated chariot, taking up the rear, which also played the familiar tunes at great volume.

After walking across Alwaye's road bridge, spanning the wide River Periyar, it was time to turn left, off the main highway to follow the road northwest to North Paravur. The afternoon was long and hot, but more agreeable than the second half of the pre-lunch walking. There was less traffic on the road, and it was more picturesque, with wide views across the paddy fields and some scattered houses. After walking for an hour or two there was sudden excitement, with pilgrims rushing into the grounds of a building off to the right. It turned out to be an ice factory. Large tanks contained ice cold water, with elaborate networks of pipes showering water into them from overhead. People splashed the water onto themselves and filled their empty bottles. The owner is actually a Catholic but is, it seems, happy to allow the Jacobite pilgrims to cool themselves.

The ice factory refreshed pilgrims for the second stretch of afternoon walking. There are no churches at which to stop. We were proceeding towards the ocean, into backwater country with its paddy fields, canals and more sparsely scattered settlement. In time we reached a more built-up area, and sensed that we must be nearing our destination. Then everyone congregated by the gates of a beige coloured house. The pilgrim leaders had to exercise some careful crowd control, because the front yard of the house would soon have overfilled with people eager to rush in to be served afternoon tea. There were tables set out with tea, coffee, buns, biscuits and bananas. It was another welcome break for rest and refreshment. The owner of the house explained to me that he considers it a privilege to be able to help the pilgrims in this way each year. It is, he says, an offering to the saint which he will provide "for as long as I live".

The late afternoon walk, following tea, was the most pleasant of the pilgrimage, even though the pilgrims were, by now, tired. The shadows were lengthening, and the cool of evening was at hand. People chattered more cheerfully, buoyed by the

pleasant surroundings and the knowledge that the destination was nearing. I conversed with fellow pilgrims about their homes, their families and their previous pilgrimages, and I made sure that I had taken some good photographs, before the light began to fade. There was mounting excitement as we neared our destination.

At around six o'clock we entered the town of North Paravur. We were joined by Father Geevarghese, former vicar of the St. Thomas Church in North Paravur, who had ensured that all the welcoming parties were ready, before himself leading the pilgrims into the centre of the town. One volunteer hurried me forward to the front of the line, anxious that I should get a good view of the proceedings and be able to take close-up photographs. The pilgrims progressed in orderly fashion, as they had throughout the pilgrimage - the vehicle, the leaders with cross, candle and flags, and the long line of the other pilgrims behind. Another small party of pilgrims merged from the left, having come from another town to the west.

It was a notable reception. There were curious onlookers everywhere, in the shops and in vehicles. We approached a portable canopy, supported by poles held by men at the four corners, beneath which stood the priests of the parish. They were wearing their black cassocks and black flat caps, each with a bright, gold *hamnikho* (a kind of stole) beneath the cassock. They welcomed the leaders of the pilgrimage and placed a garland around the portrait of Mar Gregorios, on the front of the decorated chariot. At this point a brass band struck up a tune and, together with locals carrying large ceremonial crosses, coloured umbrellas and banners, led the pilgrimage party along the main street. Towards the end of this street stood a number of local dignitaries outside the Municipal Council building. They too welcomed the pilgrims and posed for press photographs, before the entire crowd, now including many of the onlookers, proceeded towards the church. At last it was in view - a large church surrounded by spacious grounds and elaborately decorated with streamers and coloured lights in honour of Mar Gregorios.

The pilgrims hurried into the church in order to make their offerings and pray at the tomb. This is a brightly lit structure, box-like with a rounded top, with a cross and portrait of Mar Gregorios, both decorated with white lights, on the front. It is on the left hand side as you face the main altar. Some pilgrims remain for only a short time; they say their prayers, rest and then return home. For them, the pilgrimage has been accomplished and that is what matters. Others stay for the festivities of the evening, the principal mass in the morning, and the celebrations which follow. After prayers there was some time for rest, and light-hearted conversation with fellow pilgrims and

taking photographs. Then preparations for the evening procession began. Out came the large silver crosses and banners for the procession.

The procession was an elaborate, impressive occasion, but exhausting for pilgrims who had been walking for the whole day beforehand. It passed along most of the main streets of North Paravur town. Many people had placed temporary shrines in front of their houses. These were small tables on top of which were portraits of the saint, candles, oil lamps and decorative plants. The priests blessed them as they passed, one carrying the sacrament in an elaborately decorated monstrance. On this occasion the priests wore brightly coloured chasubles (the outermost gown) and equally decorated three-cornered hats. There were several vehicles with portraits of Mar Gregorios, decorated with coloured lights, again resembling the chariots of Hindu temple festivals. Traditional musicians of the type which accompany most Hindu processions also participated. In addition there was a brass band, and plenty of additional noise from the frequent explosion of firecrackers. An interesting feature of the occasion is that prayers are offered to a granite cross in the churchyard. This is said to have bowed down, and then stood upright again, at the precise time that Mar Gregorios passed away.

On returning to the church, I was offered some *kanni* (rice gruel) for supper with some priests and other volunteers. I had to excuse myself soon after this as I was exhausted. I was offered a bed near to the priest's quarters for which I was grateful.

Mass was celebrated twice early the next day, with chanted prayers and sermons amplified by a loud-speaker system to crowds outside the church. The significance of Mar Gregorios and his role in reviving the Syrian traditions were emphasized. Many people arrived for mass who had not participated in the pilgrimage. There was a short, but crowded, procession around the church grounds, which was followed by a feast. This is perhaps the highlight of the celebration for many locals; some might attend who otherwise have little interest in the proceedings. Vast quantities of "beef" curry (almost certainly buffalo) and rice were cooked in large vats. The food was blessed by the priest and served to all visitors on a section of banana leaf. People consumed it wherever they could find space to sit in the crowded church grounds.

During the feast I met church trustees, local priests and other visitors. I was pleased by their enthusiasm and interest in my enquiries. I noticed that a number of locals who had migrated overseas for work made a point of returning at this time. After this, I said my goodbyes to fellow pilgrims and locals. The crowds dispersed and the

pilgrims from further afield headed for the bus station. I was able to share a car with a priest as far as Alwaye, before continuing on to Ernakulam.

### **The Malayattur Pilgrimage.**

Malayattur is a hill in Ernakulam District, located beside the River Periyar, up-river from Alwaye and about one hour's drive to the northeast of Ernakulam Town. It has long been famous for its association with St. Thomas. According to tradition, the apostle retreated here for meditation. Whilst it is under the control of the Syro-Malabar Church, larger of the two Syrian Catholic Churches, it attracts Christians from most denominations, including Jacobites, and many non-Christians as well. It is the most frequently discussed of the Christian centres in Ernakulam District. During the season tens of thousands of pilgrims arrive to make the walking ascent and give offerings at the footprint of St. Thomas at the top.<sup>8</sup>

As noted earlier, Malayattur is sometimes called the "Christian Sabarimala". There are significant parallels between Kerala's most famous Christian pilgrimage and the Hindu pilgrimage for Sri Ayyappan, which is itself, perhaps, the most famous equivalent for the Hindus. Both are considered to have wide appeal which transcends distinctions of caste and creed. Both are associated with traditional pilgrims' garb. The pink-orange robes of a renouncer are used for Malayattur. Robes of this colour as well as black, green and blue can be worn for Sabarimala. Both are associated with chanting by the pilgrims in honour of St. Thomas or Sri Ayyappan. Both occur during a fixed season each year.

The season of the Malayattur pilgrimage includes Lent, Easter and the two following weeks. The Sunday after Easter is the most popular time, with the following, final Sunday, the "Octave", the second most popular. I participated in the group pilgrimage at the former time, whilst making a small private pilgrimage on the Octave. There are no conspicuous preparations or rituals of departure for Malayattur, in contrast to Sabarimala, which was one reason for my greater difficulty in discovering groups that were planning to make the journey. To some extent Lent takes the place of this, as many Christians consume only vegetarian food during this period. In the middle of the week between the two visits to Malayattur, the pilgrimage to North Paravur took place. This made me particularly conscious of the contrasting styles of organization and other characteristics of the two pilgrimages. I will concentrate on describing my journey with the group - the first of the two visits to Malayattur.

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<sup>8</sup>There are also significant sites associated with the martyrdom of St. Thomas at Mylapore in Madras which were vigorously incorporated into the Catholic cult of the saint during the Portuguese period (Bayly 1989:260-6, see also D'Souza 1964).

The pilgrims assembled at about 9.00 p.m. on the Saturday evening by the bus. It was parked beside our local Latin Catholic church, near the jetty for the harbour ferries. Participants from Ponnarimangalam, on Bolghatty Island, arrived by ferry and hurried onto the bus. When everyone was settled, the bus was full, with about sixty pilgrims in the party. There were all ages; several family groups with children, parents and grandparents. Young men and women were, however, particularly preponderant. As we set off and drove through town into the night, there was an atmosphere of anticipation, with excited chatter, but there were no rituals of any kind during the bus journey except for one very brief stop. This was when the bus halted by St. George's Church at Edapally, probably the most famous Catholic church in the vicinity of Ernakulam Town. It is conveniently located beside the highway which runs northwards out of Cochin. Many people make a brief stop here, whether they are on pilgrimage or some other quite mundane journey. On this occasion there was barely time to drop a coin at the roadside shrine.

As we drove on I chatted to my fellow pilgrims, about where they lived, their jobs and their experience of this pilgrimage. I discovered that some worked near to my apartment. We travelled on quiet roads, through the darkness, until a long line of white light became visible in the distance. It was a long arc of light stretching skywards, defining the shape of one side of a hill against the black sky. The lights were the artificial illumination marking the path up to the top of Malayattur. Soon we entered the village of Malayattur which was extremely crowded. We passed the main parish church, cheerfully decorated with coloured lights and large painted panels with figures of St. Thomas and other saints. Beyond the village, the bus pulled out onto a large, muddy expanse of grass beside a lake. Here a space to park was found amongst hundreds of other parked buses.

The pilgrims came down from the bus. It was agreed that there should be time for worship in the early hours of Sunday morning, but that the bus would begin its return journey at 4.30 a.m. Once this had been determined, there was no particular attempt to keep the whole group together, people made off in smaller parties of family or friends. Even keeping these smaller groups together could be difficult in the crush.

Beyond the parking area, we passed long lines of stalls selling souvenir pictures, cassettes and toys. These are present at all such occasions. There was a small chapel and near to this, facing away from the hill, was a large statue of St. Thomas, holding a spear, symbolic of his martyrdom. There was another stretch of souvenir and refreshment stalls, and a steady flow of crowds moving in both directions. We

picked our way amongst them before we reached the base of the hill and began the ascent.

At first the path was steep, with some large boulders to clamber over. This soon became tiring - it would have been an arduous climb even without the need to avoid the stream of people coming down. In addition to this, it was a particularly hot, humid night. Once again the pilgrimage assumed the quality of ordeal, a struggle, a penance. People became breathless. Soon I was almost unbearably soaked in perspiration. You could keep an eye on fellow pilgrims, but it was too tiring to exchange more than occasional comments. Anxiously, I observed the first of the Stations of the Cross appear ahead. Here, people were praying and lighting candles before a picture which stood atop a wooden post, about seven feet high. It represented Pilate sentencing Jesus to crucifixion. In time the second station was reached and then the third. It was necessary to sit to catch your breath and drink water at regular intervals.

After a period of struggle, perhaps just when exhaustion was setting in, the ascent became easier. The path was less steep, less rocky and the Stations of the Cross were now being passed with encouraging frequency. Some of the pilgrims carry crosses, sometimes large ones hauled on their backs. A few people carry rocks. Here and there someone is wearing pilgrim's garb, resembling a *sannyasin*, but most people are wearing ordinary dress. It was impressive to watch the determination of some pilgrims, old people, children and disabled. Sometimes they stumbled, unintentionally resembling the images of Jesus falling on some of the Stations of the Cross. Some people chant "Ponnin Kurisu Muthappo, Ponmala Kayattam" (O Grandfather of the Golden Cross, we climb the Golden Mountain; Chittilappilly 1995). But it is far from being the omnipresent cry of the pilgrims at Sabarimala which comprises an almost continuous refrain during the ascent. At Malayattur, traditional motifs - carrying crosses or rocks, distinctive garb and chanting - are all less conspicuous than at Sabarimala.

At last the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth stations were reached in quick succession. None of my fellow pilgrims seemed motivated to linger by these. Everyone was eager to reach the stone steps which mark the end of the path and find somewhere to sit at the top. People refreshed themselves with water, coffee and bananas. I was exhausted, as much as on any other pilgrimage and needed time to recover. As everyone says "It's not the distance, it's the heat". Malayattur is not, in fact, very high - it is more a hill than a mountain. But this was an exceptionally hot

and humid night, and extremely crowded. Sitting still to rest provided an opportunity to converse with other pilgrims, and gaze around. Almost everywhere exhausted pilgrims were sitting or stretched out on the ground, except beside the small church where crowds were jostling to get in. In front of the church is a raised altar which is only enclosed to the side and back so that large crowds can stand before it to celebrate mass, which is conducted regularly throughout the night.

As the next celebration of mass got under way I moved forward to join the crowd. A gangway, formed by two concrete barriers running forwards from the altar, separated the crowd into two halves. Along either side of this gangway the priests could proceed to give communion to the pilgrims. Many would also have queued for confession or to request blessings from a line of priests standing near to our rest spot. I wandered at random for a few minutes amongst the crowds before it was time to find a place beyond the temporary metal fence barriers where we could join the line of people waiting to enter the church.

There was excited jostling and clamour from the pilgrims eager to enter the church, although this did not appear to disturb others, immediately on the other side of the fence, who were sound asleep. The pushing became particularly urgent as we ascended the last few steps into the church. Inside everyone gazed at a huge golden cross rising from the floor to a height of twelve feet or more. It is said to mark the spot at which a golden cross miraculously appeared on a rock, many years ago, to some hunters who were roaming over the hill. It was the miraculous cross which indicated that St. Thomas had prayed here. The church also has a statue of St. Thomas, garlanded, with blood-tipped spear in one hand and open Bible in the other.

The pilgrims proceeded out through the western door of the church, down some steps, and, after a few yards, encountered a stone cross about three feet high. Beyond this was a metal grille held in place by low concrete walls about a foot above the surface of the rock. People strained to peer through the grille to see a concave impression in the rock. This is said to be the footprint of St. Thomas. Pilgrims tossed coins or candles onto the grille. Beyond this more steps led downward, marking the beginning of the descent.

We allowed some more time for rest or contemplation before we made our descent. We noticed the wall of an outhouse, apparently belonging to the Kerala Catholic Youth Movement, which was evidently an especially popular place for burning candles and leaving money offerings. Volunteers, identifiable from their rosettes,



were busily trying to separate coins from candles and packaging - most of the latter becoming heaped together as one large blaze. After brief rest and conversation it was time for the descent. Fortunately this was less arduous than the ascent, but it was necessary to be careful because the path is stony and it was still extremely crowded. There were beggars everywhere at first, more than I had noticed on the way up. The time was about 3.30 a.m., as we set off downwards. It was easier to observe the ascending pilgrims as they came towards you, and one could spot some carrying crosses, rocks or reading from prayer books. The stations are more rapidly passed in reverse and quite soon we were back to level ground again.

We took a few moments to examine souvenirs at the stalls and buy one or two pictures, before retracing our steps to the grassy area where the buses were parked. There were so many buses that I wondered at first how we could locate our own. Eventually we spotted some familiar faces, and boarded our bus. Everyone looked exhausted, many were asleep. Soon it was the appointed time for departure. The bus returned to Ernakulam, by which time it was just becoming light. "Now you should go to Pottha" someone said, referring to the charismatic retreat centre, some miles to the north, which has become an enormously popular focal point for contemporary Catholic religiosity. After the bus reached Ernakulam, the pilgrims returned to their homes.

My subsequent visit to Malayattur, on the following Sunday, was made during the hours of daylight, starting the climb at about 10 a.m. This enabled me to get a better impression of the general appearance of the hill, and the beautiful views from the top. To my surprise, it was cooler this time and much more comfortable. I made the ascent in the company of a friend of mine who was, as it happened, a relative of both the Assistant Vicar of the church and of the chief guest celebrant, who led a small procession with coloured umbrellas around the church.

We spoke briefly to the two clerics who were related to my fellow-pilgrim. It was remarked that for many participants the journey has acquired a rather casual quality. People travel hastily by bus or car, ascend the mountain with little prayer or other symbolic elaboration and on reaching the top, as my friend put it, "they just do what they see others doing". Of course, the journey may still have personal significance for such people, but the occasion lacks the ritually elaborated quality which has traditionally been associated with the pilgrimage. There are some parishes, and some private groups of pilgrims, which make a point of wearing the garb, carrying crosses and carefully saying a full cycle of prayers for the stations of the cross. They may

walk many miles from their parish church to the hill, instead of travelling by bus. But such pilgrimages are now the minority, organized only by the most enthusiastic priests or committed lay pilgrims. My second pilgrimage was a more relaxed affair, because we could time it as we wished, before descending the hill and making a visit to my friend's parental home, which is near to Malayattur.

### **Two Contrasting Pilgrimages.**

The two pilgrimages differ in a number of significant respects. Most of the participants walking to North Paravur are Jacobites, Patriarch supporting Orthodox Christians, whilst Malayattur attracts both Catholics - of all three rites - and non-Catholics. Some Hindus participate in the North Paravur event, whilst there are many non-Christians, Hindus and some Muslims, at Malayattur. This reflects the fact that Jacobite pilgrimages are considered to be community occasions. These occasions rally the faithful to express their devotion to a specifically Syrian Orthodox saint, a prelate who embodied commitment to the Syrian tradition and the Patriarch of Antioch. Consequently these pilgrimages have a dual aspect, on the one hand they reinforce the loyalty of the pilgrims by offering the possibility of spiritual or worldly gains resulting from their veneration of the Jacobite saints. On the other hand, they comprise a display of commitment, a show of strength, by the Jacobite community.

The importance of Jacobite pilgrimages as visible and publicized displays of loyalty and solidarity can be understood in the context of the troubled recent history of this community. It is no doubt the case that the death anniversary of Mar Gregorios has been celebrated with pomp and enthusiasm regularly since 1671. This was probably important in maintaining the prestige of the Jacobite community in the area of North Paravur and affirming their separate identity, thereby distinguishing them from Catholic and Hindu neighbours. However, in this century there has been the bitter dispute which has divided the Orthodox Christians. The St. Thomas Church in North Paravur, a strongly Jacobite, pro-Patriarch parish, has thereby assumed added importance as one of the celebrated churches under the control of the Jacobites. It is, as emphasized, the burial place of a key figure in establishing a strong connection with Antioch.

The walking of thousands of pilgrims to Manjinikara, as well as to Kothamangalam, North Paravur and Mulanthuruthy in Ernakulam District, clearly asserts the contemporary significance of the Antiochene allegiance. In fact, it is during the last twenty years or so, in the wake of the success achieved by the Manjinikara journey, that these pilgrimages have acquired the highly elaborate, and well-organized - almost ostentatious - character which is observed now. With the encouragement of committed priests and bishops this has led to the dramatically expanding enthusiasm for pilgrimage, particularly organized walking pilgrimage, on the part of Jacobites. It was noted, for example, that many of the North Paravur pilgrims came from

Puthencruz, previously the parish of the present Bishop of Ankamali and Kothamangalam who is a keen supporter of pilgrimage activity.

A particularly important feature of Jacobite pilgrimages is that they pass slowly - by walking - through the terrain en route. This means that stops can be made which educate pilgrims about famous, or disputed, sites of their community. In addition, there can be interaction with onlookers, who can hardly fail to notice the blaring devotional songs of the pilgrims as they pass. Many of the onlookers make money offerings or give refreshments. None of these features characterize the Malayattur pilgrimage. Participants in long walking journeys may gain a sense of the meditative quality of pilgrimage during the quieter stretches. In addition, they acquire an awareness of historically resonant features of ecclesiastical topography - that the Jacobite church in North Paravur stands some distance from the older site of the Catholic church; that participants may only pass by the outside gate of the church and seminary at Alwaye, for example.

A high level of organization is required for the Jacobite pilgrimages. There is always a committee to ensure that meals and refreshments are provided at the appropriate stopping points, that the route and timing of arrivals and departures is correctly managed, that arrangements for the receptions by clergy and local dignitaries at the destination are in place. The whole occasion requires team effort and careful co-ordination. Volunteers regard it as both a matter of duty and some prestige that they are able to lead the pilgrimage and guide its arrangements. In part, this no doubt reflects an awareness that the Jacobite community is challenged on several fronts by other Christian groups. There is the struggle with the Catholicos-party Orthodox, as well as rivalry with the Catholics (the Syro-Malankara Church, the smaller of the two Syrian Catholic Churches, was formed following a breakaway from the Jacobites) and most recently there has been the rise of charismatic and pentecostalist groups (cf. Stirrat 1992 on Sri Lankan Catholicism). Not surprisingly, in view of the notable success of Jacobite pilgrimages, both the Catholicos-party side (at Parumala) and some Syrian Catholics have acquired an interest in organizing similar events for themselves. Some Syro-Malankara Catholics explained to me that they had wished to organise Jacobite-like pilgrimages to Malayattur. But this had not gained sufficient popularity. If we consider the contrasting characteristics of the Malayattur pilgrimages, some of the reasons for this should be evident.

The Malayattur pilgrimage is not similar to the Jacobite journeys. It honours a saint who is held in high regard by almost all Christians, and many others as well. The

features of particular interest to pilgrims are, of course, the footprint and the miraculous cross; there is no tomb here. Most of the pilgrims walk up the hill only, reaching its base by motor transport. Above all, the occasion is organized completely differently. Countless separate parties of pilgrims converge at the site and they all make their own arrangements. For the most part clergy are not much involved in this, which was one reason for my difficulty in finding out about organized groups. This reflects the fact that there is no obvious socio-political aspect to the pilgrimage; it is not making a statement on behalf of any one community. Therefore, the clergy are not motivated to exert strong influence to ensure that the correct message is conveyed. In addition, Catholic clergy tend to be somewhat more detached from the laity; not least because they do not have families, unlike most of their Jacobite/Orthodox counterparts. I have sometimes heard strong complaints about this distance from ordinary parishioners.

As indicated previously, the significant parallel with Malayattur is Sabarimala. The Malayattur pilgrims chant repetitively - in contrast to the devotional songs of the Jacobites - and some carry crosses or rocks on their heads, akin to the *irumudi* (bundle of pilgrim's offerings) for Sabarimala, some wear traditional garb (on Sabarimala see Daniel E.V. 1984, Vaidyanathan 1992). In fact, most of the Malayattur pilgrims do not do these things, and it could be said that for them the occasion resembles simply another church festival which happens to require the ascent of a hill. Herein lie some of the sources of dispute which tend to surround the Malayattur pilgrimage. Many people argue that it is becoming diluted, that the significance of the occasion is undermined by "improvement" of facilities and by the sheer numbers of people making the trip now. Similar controversies continuously surround Sabarimala, in a way which is much less likely for the "community pilgrimages", for which there is greater consensus concerning the aims of the pilgrimage. The Jacobite community may squabble with the Catholicos-supporting Orthodox, of course, but they try hard to maintain consensus within their own group.

Pilgrims to Malayattur (and Sabarimala) can make the trip whenever they like during the season, although there are one or two especially popular days. This obviously precludes the level of voluntary support for the pilgrims en route which characterizes the Jacobite journeys. Since few of the pilgrims walk before reaching the hill, there is, in any case, little chance of their interacting with onlookers and communities along the way. There is no reception for them on arrival and no feast for them before

returning home again. The occasion is what the pilgrims make it. In practice they often depend on the motivation of just one or two individuals.

Differences in worship which can be observed at the two pilgrim centres reflect, for the most part, general differences between Jacobite and Catholic practice. For example, the sacrament and silver crosses are taken in procession by the Jacobites, but there is no veneration of statues as there is for Catholics. The Jacobite mass is long, and celebrated twice in the morning following the North Paravur pilgrimage, whilst Catholic mass (Syro-Malabar in this case) is much shorter, and performed regularly, including through the night, at Malayattur. The Stations of the Cross and confession are emphasized by Catholics. The cults of saints tombs are particularly important for the Jacobites, although there are some parallels to this for Catholics as well.

It is evident that the pilgrims understand the North Paravur and Malayattur pilgrimages to be different sorts of occasion. Whilst in both cases people talk about their hopes for blessings, the significance of penance or spiritual development and the holiness of the saints with their intercessory role, the political character of the North Paravur pilgrimage is also evident in many comments as well. The walk by the Jacobites is both *yatra* (journey) and *jatha* (march or demonstration) as we saw for the Manjinikara journey. It is quite clearly a display of devotion to a Middle Eastern holy man who was an upholder of the Syrian tradition and the Antiochene connection. Pilgrims are proud of its character as a display, as a visible expression of commitment, which is growing in scale whilst also preserving its own distinctive features. This pride contrasts with the complaints which are heard for Malayattur, that it is becoming overcrowded and trivialised, that people combine it with a trip for shopping or to the cinema, that it may become "just a picnic".

### **Distinguishing Categories of Pilgrimage**

The North Paravur and Malayattur pilgrimages exemplify two different types of pilgrimage which can be found amongst the Syrian Christians of Kerala. The first type, which I call "category one", comprises community pilgrimages such as that to Manjinikara, North Paravur and other Jacobite sites. These are dominated by members of one group, one denomination, and can be seen to have clear social significance for this community. They make a statement on its behalf - in the case of North Paravur concerning commitment to the Patriarchy of Antioch and the Syrian tradition. This affirms the distinctive identity of Jacobites in the face of rivalry - sometimes open hostility - from Catholics and Catholicos-side Orthodox. Participants value the opportunity to express their loyalty to the Church and its tradition, and gain a sense of solidarity from this. The pilgrimage also has personal significance for individual participants who hope to benefit from it as an act of penance, and as a time to pray about their own concerns at the tomb. The latter aspect explains the attraction of the pilgrimage to some participants, mostly Hindus, who are not Jacobites.

The Malayattur pilgrimage is in "category two". Although there is a well established tradition of symbolic journeying, it is not dominated by any particular community - it does not make any statement on behalf of a group. Indeed differences amongst Christians, such as Latin versus Syrian or Patriarch-side versus Catholicos-side, are not important here. People of all castes and religions come to pay their respects. The emphasis is entirely upon the benefit of penance and prayer for the individual pilgrims, and the possible blessings which may be derived from this. There can be an important social dimension; for example, newly-wed couples often make the pilgrimage together, as do families and parties of friends, perhaps a parish prayer group. The pilgrimage may strengthen pre-existing social bonds but is less likely to create new ones. Turnerian *communitas* is less likely than during the community pilgrimages - for Malayattur it is not obviously present, even in its "normative" form. Whilst traditionally the pilgrimage has been a symbolically elaborated journey, which is considered to have importance as a unique spiritual undertaking, a demanding but valuable experience, this character is being lost. It is on this issue that controversy and contrasting points of view are apparent.

Both category one and category two pilgrimages are ritual journeys. They are likely to be undertaken on foot - though some journeys are associated with symbolic elaboration (rituals of departure, songs and prayers en route, particular dress, etc.)

whilst using motor transport. However, the two types differ in their sociological significance and the way in which they are viewed by individual participants. One consequence of this is that they are affected differently by change. Jacobite pilgrimages are more carefully controlled, and so, in a sense, both more easily altered and more easily protected against unwanted change. They would, however, be affected by wider political developments, for example if property were granted to the Catholicos-side, or if there were a reconciliation. Category two pilgrimages are threatened by over-zealous development, which could boost the income of the site but at the same time destroy its character. Mountain-top sites are particularly suitable destinations for ritual journeys, but even here there can be construction of roads, railways or concrete paths, as well as hotels, restaurants and such like.

The large variety of pilgrim centres for which the journey itself is not significant, to which you can travel however you like, can be put together for present purposes as "category three". Jacobites have only one outstanding pilgrim centre of this type, (Manarcad) because for their most important churches there are now well-established walking pilgrimages. From the point of view of a traditionalist, the concern about category two pilgrimages is that they will become steadily less distinct from category three. How far this will be the case for Malayattur or Sabarimala is an open question. It is interesting that there is growing enthusiasm for carefully organised, category one pilgrimages amongst some Catholics. There is no doubt that many Catholics, and others, are impressed by the popularity of the Jacobite pilgrimages, and aware of the evident success of such occasions in attracting publicity and cash offerings. We noted the interest which had been shown by some Syro-Malankara Catholics in organizing pilgrimages of this type to Malayattur, although they were unsuccessful. However, to the south in Kottayam District, an organised Catholic pilgrimage which is a walking, community journey - a category one event in my terms - is achieving success. It travels from various starting points to Kudamalloor, birthplace of Sister Alphonsa. I participated in it in August 1995. It is notable that Sister Alphonsa is a well-loved, recent and local figure (Chacko 1990). Her cult is a distinctively *Kerala* Catholic affair. In this respect, it resembles that of Mar Gregorios of Parumala, and is likely to be much more suitable as a focal point for category one pilgrimages than Malayattur.

Catholics, it should be noted, have many sites that can be regarded as examples of category three pilgrim centres. The famous St. George's Church at Edapally, at which we stopped briefly en route to Malayattur, is the most important such site in the vicinity of Ernakulam Town. Many people visit this church, especially at festival



time. Many people stop briefly at other times whilst travelling elsewhere. But the journeying process itself is not significant, what matters is simply what you do when you are there [see Puthanangady (ed) 1986 on contemporary Catholic cults].

The next chapter will aim to show that, whilst Jacobites are the community within Central Kerala which has become most notably enthusiastic for community pilgrimages, there is a notable parallel amongst Hindus, specifically Izhavas. We will see that whilst Hindus have a major destination for religious journeying of wide appeal, attracting members of many castes, with each party organizing its own pilgrimage - this is Sabarimala, which parallels Malayattur for Christians - Izhavas have, in addition, their own equivalent to the Manjinikara/North Paravur pilgrimages. This is the journey to Sivagiri, burial place of Sri Narayana Guru.

## TWO CONTRASTING CHRISTIAN PILGRIMAGES:

### North Paravur

#### The destination:

To the tomb of Mar Gregorios (died 1671)  
In a church under Syrian Orthodox  
Mar Gregorios is a specifically Jacobite saint

In a town near coast

#### The journey:

walking all the way

pilgrimage party moves as one large, disciplined unit  
occurs on one particular day

at front of party there is a decorated chariot, some crosses, flags and a candle  
no particular dress for pilgrims, although many women wear white  
traditional and modern devotional songs are sung

stops at Churches on way for prayers and refreshments

refreshments and offerings given by bystanders along route

#### Organisation and Provision:

very carefully organised with help of bishops and priests of dioceses and parishes passed through

meals given to pilgrims by volunteers with feast for pilgrims on following day

reception by town authorities with procession  
careful publicity before, and during, the pilgrimage  
large-scale team effort

#### Worship and Ritual:

### Malayattur

To a footprint of St. Thomas  
By a church under Syrian Catholics  
St. Thomas is popular with almost all Christians and many others  
On a mountain, inland

walking up the hill only (for most pilgrims)

many separate parties of pilgrims converge at the site  
there is a season with one or two especially holy days  
some pilgrims carry crosses or rocks  
some pilgrims wear orange-pink robes

repetitive chants

few stops if any

no interaction with onlookers

each group organises itself, often lay only, bishops and priests less involved.

no feast or special provision

no reception, some short processions around top of hill  
publicity not so carefully arranged

parties rely mostly on motivation of one or two organisers

pray at tomb	offerings at footprint and cross
sacrament and crosses taken in	statues taken in procession and
procession, no statues	venerated
long mass	
confession not emphasised	short mass
	confession for many, also some follow
	Way of the Cross

giving and taking of oil from lamps	burning candles
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Participants:

mostly Jacobites, some Hindus	almost all denominations of Christians and many others
pilgrims emphasise significance to community:	pilgrims emphasise individual motives and blessing sought
maintaining Antiochene connection, as well as possible personal benefits	
pilgrimage is <i>yatra</i> and <i>jatha</i>	pilgrimage is only <i>yatra</i> ; differences amongst Catholics or others not significant

Impact of change:

penance and seriousness of occasion is emphasised - character of pilgrimage consistently maintained	pilgrimage treated by some as recreational ( e.g. combined with trip to cinema); many complain of overcrowding, some overdevelopment of site and dilution of character of the event, becoming "like a picnic"
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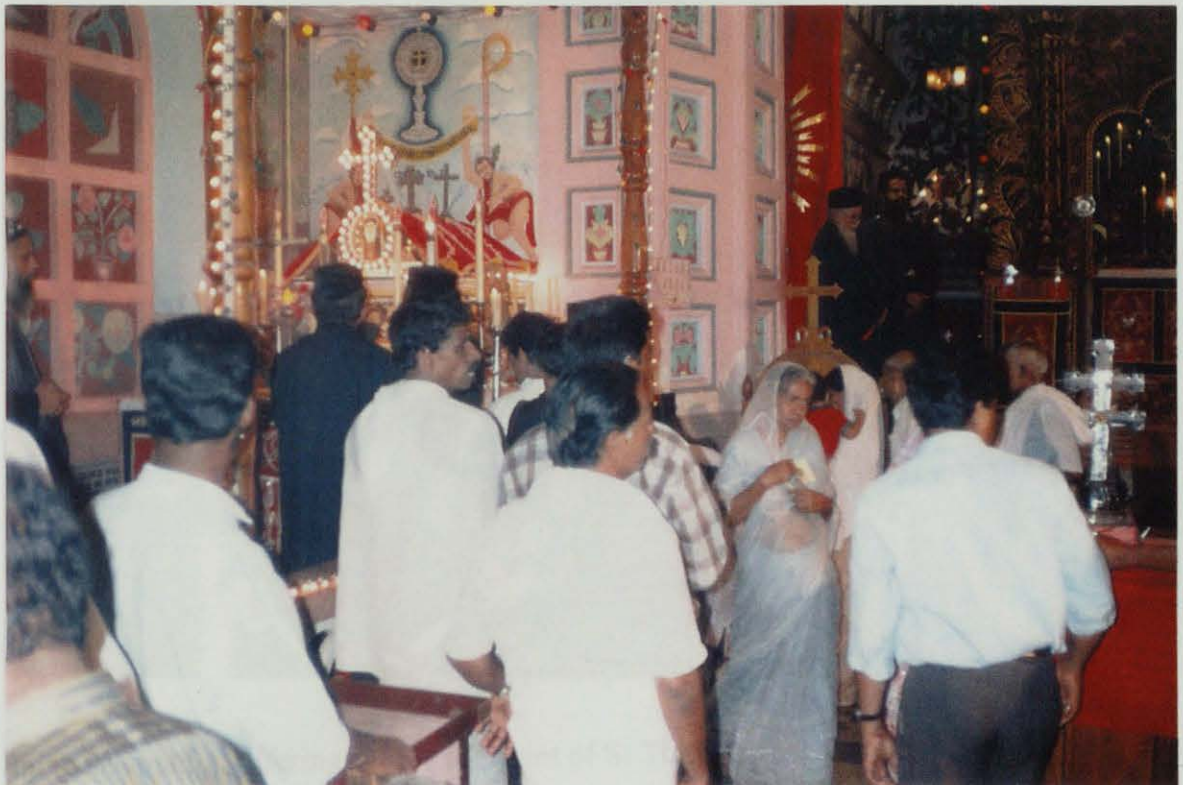
features common to both:

money offerings; buying souvenirs; theology of intercession; both pilgrimages follow Lent (period of abstinence) and said to be acts of penance; both St. Thomas and Mar Gregorios had connections with Jerusalem/Holy Land area.

## The North Paravur Pilgrimage



The pilgrimage party arrives in North Paravur; the local priest (wearing decorated stole with back to camera) is about to garland the portrait of Mar Gregorios on the decorated Chariot.



Inside the St Thomas Church at North Paravur pilgrims congregate to say prayers by the tomb which is to the left of the Sanctuary, with illuminated cross.





Pilgrims ascending the hill near the summit. The thirteenth Station can be seen, depicting the body of Jesus being taken down from the cross. Sunday morning two weeks after Easter.



Pilgrims making offerings at the footprint of St Thomas; early hours of Sunday morning, one week after Easter.

## Summary of Chapter Five:

Chapter five contrasts two Christian pilgrimages of Ernakulam District. The Jacobites' walking journey to North Paravur is compared with pilgrimage to Malayattur, a mountain site which belongs to Syrian Catholics. The North Paravur pilgrimage is similar to that to Manjinikara, although it travels only within Ernakulam District. It occurs at the hottest time of the year, in late April. One of the towns passed through is Alwaye which was, in 1978, the setting for one of the fiercest clashes between the two sides in the Jacobite/Orthodox dispute. At North Paravur, there are fairly ostentatious welcoming receptions and processions, with feasting on the following day.

The Malayattur pilgrimage is quite different. At first I found it difficult to join a group pilgrimage because no one seemed to know who was organising one at the relevant time. I did, however, manage to travel with such a group on the Saturday/Sunday after Easter, which is the most popular time. After reaching the hill by bus, our walking ascent was made late on the Saturday night. It was extremely hot and humid. At the top, we viewed the golden cross, the footprint of St. Thomas and the almost continuous celebration of mass. We returned to the bus in the early hours of Sunday morning. I was able to make a private pilgrimage in the company of a Syrian Catholic friend on the next Sunday as well.

In contrast to the Malayattur journeys, the North Paravur pilgrimage is carefully organised in order to make a statement about loyalty to Antioch. It travels on one particular day, there is often interaction with onlookers and volunteers and frequent stops at churches en route. The Malayattur pilgrimages are usually organised in a more impromptu fashion by local groups. There is no particular denomination or community which is seen to predominate. Many people say that the character of the event is becoming diluted; it is spoiled, they say, by overcrowding and "modernisation" of facilities.

## CHAPTER 6

### **WALKING FOR THE GURU OR FOR AYYAPPAN: TWO HINDU PILGRIMAGES**

## Similarities between Hindu and Jacobite Pilgrimage

It was apparent from early in my fieldwork that there is at least one Hindu pilgrimage which strikingly resembles those of the Jacobites. This is the pilgrimage of the Izhavas to Sivagiri, which was, as I have indicated, a significant factor in influencing me to focus on this caste from amongst the Hindus. The parallels are worth stating fairly clearly, taking the Manjinikara pilgrimage for comparison since it is the most important of the Jacobite journeys. Firstly, both occasions can be said to be "community pilgrimages" which involve, mostly, members of a single caste/Church. Secondly, they are both carefully organized. People travel long distances, on foot, according to a pre-planned schedule. They usually act in a thoroughly disciplined manner, which ensures that the pilgrimage gives a favourable impression to onlookers (and to the press). During the pilgrimage people abstain from meat and liquor and join in sessions of prayers and songs. Thirdly, the pilgrimage event can be said to involve not just those who walk, but also many others who prepare meals, provide hospitality or simply offer encouragement and token gifts on the way. Fourthly, participants will comment that the pilgrimage has both a personal and spiritual significance for them as individuals, and also a social significance by conveying a message to the wider society about their convictions i.e. the journey has features of both *jatha* and *yatra*. Fifthly, the pilgrims travel to the resting places of saints who are acknowledged leaders, "father figures" one can say, to their respective communities - the Patriarch and Sri Narayana Guru. Finally, at the destination, pilgrims are expected to pay respects to the saint and also attend large meetings which inform them about matters of concern to their community.

When participants in either Sivagiri or Manjinikara pilgrimages discuss them, they are likely to make comparisons with Sabarimala. It is, after all, the most well-known pilgrimage in Kerala. It is significant that the themes of penance, spiritual progress through endurance of hardship, and surrender to divinity, as well as prayers for blessings, are important for all of them. Interestingly, Sri Narayana Guru himself stipulated that yellow should be the colour for Sivagiri pilgrims in contrast to white for the householder, saffron for the sannyasin (sometimes Malayattur pilgrims) and black (sometimes orange, green or blue) for Sabarimala pilgrims (Sanoo 1978:210). Nonetheless, it is the parallel between Sivagiri and Manjinikara pilgrimages which I would like to emphasize, despite the fact that very few people are likely to undertake both. Consequently, people are less likely to comment on the two of them together. The high level of organisation of the Sivagiri pilgrimage, with active involvement of



leading swamis, and its role in carrying a message on behalf of the community, is comparable to Manjinikara and is quite unlike Sabarimala or Malayattur. The latter two pilgrimages also resemble each other to some degree; there are some pilgrims, mostly Hindus, who are motivated to visit both.

In order to make clear the parallels and differences between the pilgrimages, I will describe journeys to both Sivagiri and Sabarimala in turn before proceeding to make some general comments. In this way, the structure of this chapter resembles that of the previous one in which the North Paravur and Malayattur pilgrimages were contrasted. It should become apparent, therefore, that in each case we are comparing a category one, community pilgrimage with a category two journey which involves many separately organised pilgrimage parties with no single caste or community dominating.

## The Sivagiri Pilgrimage

In December 1994 there were two walking pilgrimages to Sivagiri involving participants from the Ernakulam area. One left Cherai, a village somewhat to the north of Cochin, on 24th December. The other required participants to reach Kottayam by bus or train, from where the walking began on 26th December. Unfortunately, I did not participate in either of these events due to a misunderstanding. The Cherai pilgrimage was to have a strictly limited number of participants, who would all have been selected before I was working in the area. The number was 63, symbolizing the number of times that the pilgrimage had occurred since its inception. I was under the impression that the same applied to the Kottayam pilgrimage, so I proposed to travel to Trivandrum to try to join a party from there. However, whilst stopping at Changanacherry, I managed to observe the Kottayam pilgrimage passing, and was astonished to find that it numbered a few hundred participants. I subsequently discovered that there is, in principle, a limit to the size of this pilgrimage, but this is interpreted quite flexibly, such that it becomes a large group.

On arrival at Trivandrum, I found that there was a pilgrimage party walking to Sivagiri which involved people of my acquaintance. It was to be shorter - one long day of walking from about 6 am to nearly 10 pm, on 30th December. Sivagiri is itself in Trivandrum District. There were to be no overnight stops before arrival at Sivagiri, and for this reason there was no particular restriction on numbers. The day after our arrival would feature a large procession followed by meetings. January 1st and 2nd would also have meetings, though most pilgrims seemed content to participate for just one of these meeting days.

The pilgrimage was a long day, but for the most part pleasant. Conditions tend to be agreeable at this time in Kerala. Throughout the journey there was singing of popular devotional songs in honour of Sri Narayana Guru, accompanied by music from audio-cassette, or live music performed by three brothers, perched on the back of the decorated van. At the beginning, as well as the end, much emphasis was placed upon platform speeches of invited guests. These concerned, especially, the Guru's teachings on inter-religious harmony and understanding. An S.N.D.P. branch chairman, a local Catholic priest, a local Muslim Imam and myself were all invited to speak. This was at Kulathoor Siva temple, on the northern edge of Trivandrum City, which was founded by the Guru himself. The speeches at Sivagiri itself often touched on this topic, but also concerned the Guru's stress upon education and self-

reliance. Prominent politicians also spoke, and there was discussion of the future aspirations of the Sri Narayana movement and the Izhava caste.

The walking journey to Sivagiri was continually punctuated by brief stops for puja - ceremonial exchanges of camphor and purple flowers with devotees who had placed portraits of the Guru on tables in front of their houses. The portraits would stand behind oil lamps, and collections of bananas, coconuts, incense and other symbols of welcoming. At each stop the camphor would be taken, the flame waved before the small portrait and then a large one which was carried on the decorated van. In this way, the occasion resembled the processions of many Hindu temples although there were extended periods of walking through sparsely populated areas, with few households to make offerings. In addition, there were many stops at small wayside shrines containing statues of the Guru, which are scattered throughout Kerala.

The pilgrims proceeded in an orderly way. They showed the same discipline and decorum as the Jacobites on their journeys. Almost all wore the yellow robes associated with Sri Narayana Guru, and with this pilgrimage in particular. One or two notable temples were passed, but there was time for little more than a glance inside. In the evening we passed near the memorial to Kumaran Asan, one of Kerala's outstanding poets, and almost an adopted son to the Guru.

There were also regular stops for refreshments, with people along the way offering drinks and food. The meals, at lunch and dinner, were served at local S.N.D.P. branches. After dark, the pilgrimage had an especially beautiful quality as we passed through the villages on Trivandrum District's coast, approaching Sivagiri. Often you could spot the ocean through the coconut trees, with lamps here and there illuminating peoples homes, and other, smaller lamps indicating someone's temporary shrine by the roadside.

An interesting point which often emerged in my subsequent discussions was that Sivagiri pilgrims show no consensus on how the Guru should be viewed. He is often called "Guru-Dewan" (Guru-God) and is certainly regarded as divine by many devotees. Others, who may be equally committed pilgrims, express doubts about this and suggest that the Guru himself would not have wished to be regarded as other than a teacher. Most take the view that he can answer prayers and bestow blessings on the pilgrims.

We have already outlined some of the historical background to the Sivagiri pilgrimage in chapter two. The previously mentioned parallels between Manjinikara and Sivagiri become especially suggestive when one considers that these two

pilgrimages occurred for the first time within a few months of each other. December 1931 saw the first pilgrimage to Sivagiri (the Guru had died somewhat earlier, in 1928) (Sanoo 1978). In late March 1932, the passing of Patriarch Mar Ignatius was marked for the first time, following his demise the previous month. Is this proximity in time just coincidence? Perhaps not, for whilst the significance of pilgrimage as a spiritual undertaking was well established, the possibility of its use for propagating a social message was coming to the fore at this time in a very conspicuous way, during the agitation for social reform in the area. A short time previously, in November 1931, Gandhi himself had encouraged a notable pilgrimage through Travancore (South/Central Kerala) to draw attention to the denial of temple entry to low castes. It was part of the campaign for entry to Guruvayur Temple which was itself inspired by the earlier campaign at Vaikom in which Sri Narayana Guru had taken an interest. In this case, the pilgrimage was especially effective as *jatha*, march or demonstration. It could also be said to constitute *satyagraha* (truth struggle) in which the endurance of a long pilgrimage testified to the moral conviction of the participants, (S. Kumar n.d; see also D. Menon 1994 esp. page 138).

The Guruvayur Satyagraha asserted a perceived right of access by using roads and visiting temples which were officially inaccessible. It thereby recalled the long association between pilgrimages and an assertion of right of access to a holy site by castes which would otherwise be considered polluting. This has also been a feature of pilgrimages to sites such as Sabarimala and Kodungallur, which were notable for the fact that restrictions on caste did not apply. As we saw in chapter two, a notable precedent was set when Gandhi himself, in March 1930, marched ceremonially to the seashore at Dandhi in Gujarat to perform the forbidden action of preparing salt. Next month, a party marched from Calicut to Payyannur for the same purpose of challenging despised restrictions. This was in British Malabar, now Northern Kerala. In a similar manner, Jacobite pilgrimages make a political statement - they declare a right of access to disputed holy sites. The Sivagiri pilgrimage recalls the successful agitations for rights of access for lower castes in pre-Independence days. Many would say that Izhavas still face issues of "access" - to reservation schemes for jobs and educational institutions - and unfinished business in removing barriers of discrimination. For this reason the maintenance of the pilgrimage tradition, and associated activities of the Sri Narayana Movement, remain of considerable importance to many Izhavas.

The Sivagiri pilgrimage propagates a message on behalf of its community, as do those of the Jacobites. It encourages attention to the message of the Guru and more

or less literal imitation of him, as the pilgrims in their yellow garb re-enact the long wanderings of Sri Narayana himself. Jacobites also say that their walking journeys imitate the travelling of saints of earlier times - the Syrian bishops, and perhaps St. Thomas himself. They affirm the importance of loyalty to their principal saints, and impress upon the observer the number of pilgrims who will express their commitment in this way.

The history of the Sivagiri pilgrimage suggests that it is, if anything, even more carefully organised than the Jacobite occasions to ensure that it spreads a message and performs a valuable social function. Sri Narayana Guru was insistent that this should be its purpose as Sanoo (1978 Part III Chapter 14) describes, and as participants are reminded in the programmes which are distributed. The Guru's famous slogan "one caste, one religion, one God" is constantly encountered - in songs, on flags, printed on people's garments. Speeches on this theme are made throughout the days of lectures and other events organised at Sivagiri. Organisers requested that I emphasise it in my own speech at the beginning of the pilgrimage. The other themes, education, cleanliness, piety, organisation, agriculture, trade, handicrafts and technical training were suggested by the Guru himself, so that it has become known as a "pilgrimage of enlightenment", encouraging self-improvement, especially amongst the disadvantaged.

It was mentioned that participants in some of the walking journeys were selected from amongst applicants, to ensure that everything is smooth running and conveys a favourable impression to the press and onlookers. But this is certainly not the case for all parties from all of the starting points, and seems to be increasingly relaxed in all cases. There is some emphasis upon the theme of penance, notably the observing of ten days' abstinence (vegetarian diet, no liquor, no sex, prayerful attitude) before, and during, the pilgrimage. This was stipulated by the Guru as a somewhat less demanding period of preparation than that required for Sabarimala (described below). In both cases, however, many participants today do not seem motivated to observe abstinence for the full period.

The issue of right of access should, for the Sivagiri pilgrims, have been mainly a matter of recollection of the past, a statement about "access" which could be interpreted more metaphorically today. However, it became a real and violent issue at Sivagiri in the later part of 1995. As has been said, dispute and controversy seem easily attracted to holy sites, and Sivagiri was no exception. An election was held to choose a chief swami. However, the result was disputed by supporters of the incumbent (who appeared to have lost). Despite court orders, they refused to hand

over control of the site to the rival swami and his supporters. This continued for some time before, eventually, the Chief Minister of Kerala ordered police to take control by force. There were some violent clashes, although the police eventually took over and imposed the ruling of the court. Many regarded the dispute, and its violent resolution, as a sad desecration of Sri Narayana Guru's holy site. The 1995 pilgrimage seems to have occurred, fortunately, without unpleasant incident.

A key fact that characterizes the Sivagiri and Jacobite pilgrimages is the large number of people who are motivated to participate to the full, with all the ritual and symbolic elaboration of the entire event. They do it entirely on foot, they perform rituals of departure and arrival. There are frequent stops for worship. There is the devotional singing and prayers and the vegetarian diet (and abstaining from alcohol). There are the flags, the decorated chariots and decorations along the route. There is the interaction with fellow pilgrims and well-wishers along the way. Conceivably, all this could be dispensed with; and it would be for a journey to the same site at any other time. But these features are retained, appreciated, and probably increasingly imitated (at least on other Jacobite and Izhava occasions, and perhaps some others). This is because the whole event attains a symbolically powerful quality, which is seen to be of value to both individual participants and the wider community.

As a result of the full ritual and symbolic elaboration of the occasion, there can be a powerful shared experience, which may lead to strengthened social ties - a possibility which can be said to emerge from the "liminality" of the event, and might approach *communitas* (c.f. Turner 1974). New friendships are formed and people express pleasure at taking part in a large social event with such a clear, and respected purpose. It seems uncertain that this is existential rather than normative *communitas*, however, partly because a sober, restrained atmosphere is retained throughout, and partly because almost all participants are, in any case, of the same caste background. In addition, however, there is the maintenance of a tradition which is held to benefit the whole community by propagating a message, enhancing the prestige of the movement and respect for its convictions. This aspect is significant because it is much less apparent for other pilgrimages.

## Pilgrimage to Sabarimala

We have seen that the pilgrimage to Sivagiri was inspired, to some degree, by that to Sabarimala. In fact, the latter's influence is almost all-pervasive in the religious culture of Central Kerala. Almost all participants in other pilgrimages in the region, regardless of caste or creed, will have some knowledge of it. It is likely that many will have been influenced by it - impressed by the emphasis upon spiritual preparation, appropriate departure rituals, the undertaking of a tiring, symbolically elaborated journey and the carrying of stipulated offerings. Some individuals will draw upon their direct experience of the Sabarimala pilgrimage in arranging and conceptualising other religious journeys in which they participate.

The Sabarimala cult is dominated by Hindu males. Women over fifty years old and girls under ten also participate with enthusiasm. Between these ages, however, females are barred because Ayyappan, the deity at Sabarimala, is a celibate bachelor who would not welcome, it is said, females within the reproductive age range. This has been arbitrarily stipulated, by the Temple Board, as being between ten and fifty years of age. It is also said that the presence of women would be a distraction for male pilgrims. There is no age restriction for men.

There is no restriction on caste or creed at Sabarimala. Ayyappan is held to welcome devotees of all castes and faiths. In fact, this is one of the most celebrated features of the pilgrimage, endlessly reiterated in publicity brochures, State Government publications, videos and so forth. The fact that there is not, nor ever has been, any exclusion of lower status castes, nor, in principle, prejudice amongst pilgrims has certainly been a factor in advancing the popularity of the pilgrimage both before and after the years of temple-entry restriction which applied elsewhere in the region. The egalitarianism of the cult is a reason advanced by some scholars for the view that it was originally a Buddhist tradition. It is also commented, in support of this, that Ayyappan is known as Sastha, said to be a name for the Buddha. This argument is made, by P C Alexander (1947) and the *Ayyappa Seva Sangham* which promotes the pilgrimage (Thomas 1973:22).

In principle, members of all Hindu castes and practitioners of all other religions may participate in the Sabarimala pilgrimage. Indeed, one of the striking features of the cult is the respect accorded to one Vavar, a Muslim pirate who is said to have become Ayyappan's lieutenant in military expeditions. Sometimes pilgrims make visits to Christian churches and shrines, especially those dedicated to St. Sebastian, apparently because both Ayyappan and St. Sebastian are associated with the shooting

of arrows. Muslim and Christian pilgrims are said to participate as well. Whilst this certainly occurs, they do not comprise a conspicuous proportion, in my experience, and their numbers seem to be decreasing as influential voices within the two communities are now often raised against signs of syncretism or spiritual eclecticism.

With regard to the Hindu castes participating, amongst Malayalis the pilgrims are mostly from middle-ranking castes, above all Nayars and Izhavas. My impression is that the same often applies for pilgrims from Tamil Nadu and elsewhere as well. Brahmins might still retain some unease about the putative abolition of caste distinctions within the cult. The priests, however, are almost all Brahmins, despite some protests on this point, although the Temple Board appoints managing committees which include Nayars and members of other castes.

During the season, mid-November to mid-January, Sabarimala pilgrims are everywhere in Central Kerala, especially at a principal hub such as Ernakulam. This means that it is easy to meet pilgrims; one can scarcely avoid them. One can be sure that a pilgrimage in the company of other enthusiastic participants can be readily arranged. This is, of course, obligatory for any researcher interested in pilgrimage traditions in Kerala because, for many Malayalis, Sabarimala is the benchmark against which the merit and subjective power of other pilgrimages is judged.

There are various ways in which pilgrimages for residents of the Ernakulam area are arranged. Pilgrims sometimes return to their home village, assuming that they do not originate from the city, and perform departure rituals there, joining a group of family and friends. People who have family and social ties within the city itself can, of course, arrange their own private parties to leave from there. However, many residents of Ernakulam, long-standing or otherwise, join one of the large bus parties of pilgrims which frequently leave the city during the season. For my first visit, I made a pilgrimage of the first type which entailed travelling from Ernakulam to a friend's home village near Changanacherry to join other members of a small party before proceeding on towards Sabarimala from there. For my second pilgrimage, the next year, I joined one of the large groups organised by the local Ayyappan temple in North Ernakulam. This was a convenient and popular arrangement for people in our neighbourhood.

The small party, for the first pilgrimage, consisted of six people. There were three members of the Izhava caste and one Brahmin, all male and around thirty years of age. In addition, our guide, or *guruswami*, was a Nayar man in his late fifties; I was the sixth member. It would be useful to describe this pilgrimage in order to convey



the main features of the event. The Sabarimala pilgrimage is already somewhat documented in the literature, and further details can be found in Daniel (1984), Vaidyanathan (1992), Sekar (1992) and also Waterstone (1989) who considers another Ayyappan temple as well. Clothey (1978) and Dumont (1970) consider Ayyappan's possible relationship with the Tamil deity Aiyandar..

Pilgrims are supposed to prepare for the journey to Sabarimala by undergoing a fairly lengthy period of preparation. This time of abstinence is called the *vratham* and should last for forty-one days. It begins, in principle, with the placing of a rosary-like chain, or *mala*, around the pilgrim's neck by a *guruswami*. It is marked, thenceforth, by wearing of pilgrim's garb; robes which are coloured black, blue, green or saffron. The pilgrim becomes an "Ayyappan". He or she has a new status as incarnation of the god, and is addressed as "swami". Throughout this period there should be abstinence from sex, alcohol and meat. In addition no shaving or conventional socialising is permitted. Instead there should be regular worship at temple and participation in sessions of group singing of devotional songs (*bhajans*). This, at least, is the ideal.

Some pilgrims of my acquaintance would insist that they are careful to observe *vratham* in a manner as close as possible to the traditional ideal. In practice, it is now the case that few Malayali pilgrims to Sabarimala are strict about this. It has become far more usual to practise abstinence and stop shaving for just a week or so, maybe for only a few days. The *mala* may be placed around the pilgrim's neck on the previous day or even just hours before departure. This was the case with both of my own pilgrimages. Consequently, the participants were clad in the characteristic pilgrim's garb for only a brief time whilst not actually undertaking the journey.

Older pilgrims, and the more traditionally-minded, especially the temple priests themselves, sometimes express regret about the dilution of the character of the pilgrimage. It is said that inadequate spiritual preparation leaves one vulnerable to misfortune, such as attack by wild animals during the journey. It is possible that a more conservative attitude towards observing the requirements of the preparatory period is more readily found in villages than in urbanised Ernakulam. However, my impression is that even here it tends to be a minority of especially enthusiastic and traditionalist pilgrims who make a point of full observance. For others, the significance of the long period of preparation has been undermined by the fact that it was supposed to last for a fixed season, beginning in mid-November and lasting until the pilgrimage takes place in late December or January. Now, however, Malayalis are often motivated to make the pilgrimage as early as possible in the season to beat

the rush. It is said that later in the season the site becomes overwhelmed with Tamils and other out-of-state pilgrims.

For both of my own pilgrimages, I was encouraged to practise appropriate abstinence for about a week before departure. My friends and fellow-pilgrims professed similar intentions for themselves. Beyond this, there was no sense that the wearing of the chain or pilgrim's clothing, or any other observances, should be enforced. Appropriate conduct seems to be seen as a matter of individual conscience now. One should attempt to achieve the best spiritual preparation that one can, compatible with attending to all the other obligations of a busy modern life. This means that whilst there certainly are some Kerala pilgrims who are careful to make their period of preparation, and the journey itself, conform as closely as possible to the ideal, this is no longer typical.

For my first pilgrimage, a week of appropriate abstinence was required whilst going about normal business in Ernakulam. However, there were no ritual performances of any kind until we had congregated near Changanacherry, at my friend's home village, on the day of departure. Here we carried out the preparation of the bundles which all pilgrims carry with them. We then travelled in a hired car up to the Pampa River before beginning the walk to the temple itself. We would not be doing the more arduous walking journey through the forest; relatively few pilgrims do. And, in addition, we would be using a hired car to reach the Pampa rather than boarding a bus. This was because our pilgrim-guide, the *guruswami*, did not have particularly good health. Use of a hired car is feasible for many Malayalis, given the relatively shorter distances they must travel, although it would not be possible for most Tamils.

We were a small party of pilgrims, six in all, within one car. Many Malayalis undertake the pilgrimage in fairly small groups of this type although, equally, large parties can be seen travelling together as well. The latter seem to be the norm for parties of pilgrims from other states who try to fill a whole bus to undertake the long journey from their home base [see, for example, Sekar's (1992) account of a pilgrimage from Madras]. The character of the pilgrimage is, of course, somewhat variable, depending on the size of the group. This was a principal reason for my concern to participate in a small-scale excursion on one occasion (my first) and in a large group the next year.

The morning of departure day was taken up with shopping in Changanacherry for necessities; the puja items to be used in the departure ritual and clean new garments. The principal item of clothing, the coloured *dhoti* which is wrapped to form a

cylinder between waist and feet, was to be orange in our case. Black, whilst the most popular colour, was too typically the colour of Tamil pilgrims, my friends maintained. Everyone wore a shirt of approximately matching colour. After shopping, coconut leaves and sections of banana tree trunk were gathered up from around the neighbourhood. These were used to create a small *pandal*, a shrine-like construction, in front of the house of one of the pilgrims. The banana tree sections made up the basic frame with the coconut leaves used to decorate it, either as strips hanging from the top or as pieces cut into a diamond shape and stuck into the frame.

Once the *pandal* had been constructed, the *puja* items were placed, on sections of banana leaf, within it, in front of a picture of Ayyappan. The *puja* items consisted of beaten rice, puffed rice, jaggery, small green bananas, turmeric powder, coconuts and ghee. It was at this time that Mr. Nayar the *guruswami* placed the mala around my neck. Other participants had done this on the previous day. After this everyone was served lunch, in typical Kerala style, with rice and vegetable curries.

After lunch, it was time for the departure ritual to begin properly. An oil lamp was lit in front of the picture of Ayyappan. The pilgrims then squatted, in turn, in front of the lamp and filled a coconut with ghee. This was done by pouring it through a hole in the shell, which had previously been made in order to remove the liquid content from within the coconut. A piece of cork was used as a plug to keep the ghee in. I filled my coconut first, as a first-time pilgrim. As the ghee was being poured in, the *guruswami* said "*Swamiyude Neyyabhishekame*" (ghee unction for Swami!) to which everyone replied "*Saranam Ayyappa*" (we place our trust in Ayyappan).

The pilgrims then began to fill the *irumudi*. This consisted of two white cloth bags made into a single bundle with two pouches. My *irumudi* was red, indicating that I was a first-time pilgrim. The first item to be placed into a cloth pouch was a *ponnum-panam* offering, consisting of a coin and arecanut wrapped in a betel leaf. The pilgrim then placed three handfuls of rice grain into the same pouch. The *guruswami* said "*Annadana prabhuve*" ("Lord of plenty") to which everyone replied "*Saranam Ayyappa*" three times again. It is said that the pouring in of handfuls of rice grain resembles part of a funeral rite (Sekar 1992:55), although in our case it was done, perhaps anomalously in this respect, by pilgrims themselves rather than non-pilgrim family members. It could be maintained that the pilgrim marks the death of an old, "worldly" self by this action. If performed by family members, however, it appears to suggest that the pilgrim may, in fact, never return. This used to be a very real fear, and still is for some anxious pilgrims and their family members.

Further items were placed into the *irumudi*. First, the ghee-filled coconut was put inside; then, another, unemptied coconut was placed in the other, back half of the two-pouch *irumudi*. This coconut used to be broken on the holy eighteen steps which are ascended by pilgrims before reaching the main shrine. Since 1986, however, the steps have been decorated with a bright gold covering. Pilgrims are not permitted to break their coconuts on this but most do it off to the side, before ascending the steps.

A separate small bag, into which had been put some beaten rice, puffed rice, jaggery, dried fruit, crystals of sugar and small green bananas was placed alongside the coconut in the back pouch. These items were to be offered to Ganapati. Lastly turmeric powder was placed in the same pouch, which would comprise the offering for the goddess Maalikappuratta Amma, whose shrine is located a short distance away from that of Ayyappan. The two bags were securely tied together to make the *irumudi*.

After each pilgrim had filled their bundle, there was a brief offering of *dakshina* to senior people, parents or grandparents of participating pilgrims. This consisted of giving some money which had been wrapped, together with an arecanut, in a betel leaf and presenting it in cupped hands to the older person. The pilgrim then respectfully touched the same person's feet. A neighbour then proceeded to mix together some of the beaten and puffed rice with banana, jaggery and sugar crystals. This was the remainder of the items from the Ganapati offering. The mixture was presented, on a plate, to all present in turn, for them to take a portion. The guruswami then lit a lamp on a small rock in front of the pandal. This done, he placed each *irumudi* on the head of its pilgrim owner, who then walked three times around the pandal, broke a coconut on the rock with the lamp, and marched off the compound towards the village temple. Walking three times around the pandal is also said to resemble a funeral rite - corpses are turned around three times before cremation (Sekar 1992:55).

We walked to the village temple to meet two pilgrims of our party who had wanted to fill their *irumudis* in their own, separate departure ritual. We then set off, chanting "*Saranam Ayyappa*" and "*Swamiye*" (Oh Swami!), finding our way to the hired car, with its driver, which would take us towards Erumeli and thence to the Pampa River. Once on the road, we competed with other parties of pilgrims in passing vehicles to shout out the cries of "*Swamiye*" the loudest. This is the characteristic sound of the pilgrimage, and is clearly felt to be both an expression of devotion and, in the

attempt to convey even greater and louder fervour than other pilgrims, also a source of amusement.

We travelled first to Erumeli and watched pilgrims perform the exuberant *petta tullal* dance. This is a standard fixture of Malayali performance of the Sabarimala pilgrimage. Participants are daubed with coloured paint, they wear head-gear fashioned from coloured balloons and wave sticks and small branches as they scamper vigorously around a temple for Ayyappan. It is said that this dance honours tribal people from the forests who were followers of Ayyappan when he was a soldier. In our case, we were more shy onlookers than enthusiastic participants. Opposite the temple, we visited Vavar's mosque. This was in the process of being constructed, a new mosque replacing a small, older one. Here we saw swords on display which are said to have belonged to Vavar, the Muslim pirate who became Ayyappan's trusted lieutenant. Then it was time to get back into the car for the long and winding ascent up to the Pampa River.

Night fell soon after we left Erumeli. We stopped for a late dinner, at about half past nine, at Rani. This was, of course, strictly vegetarian. There was then about two hours driving through the mountains before we passed through a traffic control point, at which a policeman opened the barrier for us and welcomed us to the pilgrimage area. Shortly afterwards a parking place was found and we got out, perching *irumudis* on our heads, and walked towards the Pampa River. Here there was a chance to rest for a while, taking a meal in one of the many crowded snack houses. We then took our bath in the holy river. This was uncomfortable because of the low temperature but not especially crowded at that time. Duly cleansed and dressed, each with *irumudi* on top again, we began our ascent to the temple area soon after midnight. At this time the path was not crowded, and, of course, walking in the night has the advantage of cooler temperatures.

The walking journey from the Pampa River to the temple area is not especially arduous, although it is steep in places. Some people find the walking a struggle if they have fitness problems. Some sore feet and aching necks, from the weight of the *irumudi* pressing down on the head, are likely. Tiredness is induced by the heat, humidity and, at the top, overcrowding. There is the added difficulty of finding a suitable spot to rest in the temple area. The discomfort of the process is nonetheless much less than is reported by pilgrims who undertake the long walk, of about forty five kilometres, along the traditional trail through the forest. For those walking only from the Pampa there are drinks stalls, with benches to rest on, beside the path for the most of the way. There is even an alternative, smoothed-out path, which has been

created to avoid any steep slopes. Features such as this cause some pilgrims to complain that it is all becoming too easy. Luxuries of this kind, however, are not to be found on the forest trail.<sup>9</sup>

There was one important stop during our ascent that night. This was at a place called Sarankutthi where a large *peepul* tree has hundreds of arrows stuck into its bark. All first time pilgrims should leave an arrow here; I was the only first-timer in our party. I embedded my arrow in the trunk of the tree. I had been instructed to buy it, earlier, at Erumeli. This is said to be the spot where Ayyappan's arrow fell when he shot it into the air to convey to the king of Pandalam (Ayyappan's adopted father) where a temple should be built. Furthermore, it is said that if, in any season, no first-time pilgrim leaves an arrow, then Ayyappan, the celibate deity, will have to fulfil a pledge to marry Maalikappuratta Amma, the goddess enshrined near him.

After Sarankutthi there was a short walk to the temple area, through an enormous construction resembling an aircraft hangar. It is actually a shelter within which queuing pilgrims can be arranged into neat lines between barriers in order for the numbers going on to the holy steps to be carefully controlled. Fortunately, very little waiting was necessary at this time and we could proceed almost immediately onto the holy steps, breaking our coconuts to one side beforehand. The shells are later gathered and burned on a large fire over to the right; it represents, some say, destruction of the worldly "outer husk" of the old self. There was some jostling on the steps themselves, which are steep and somewhat awkward. There was no time for a considered, contemplative ascent even though this signals the climax of the pilgrimage.

Beyond the steps we joined a queue which curved around the principal shrine. It is a small, fairly modest looking building with sloping tiled roof, in typical Kerala style. The queue moved encouragingly fast. On reaching the shrine itself it was clear why this was so; you got a split second to take darshan, look at the image of Ayyappan, before you were pushed on. Some pilgrims prostrate themselves and then roll around the shrine, though this is difficult at the busiest times<sup>10</sup>. The ghee-filled coconut was then broken near an official collecting point. From here, the ghee is taken to be poured over the image by temple staff. We did our best to perform the required

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<sup>9</sup>Pilgrims should undertake the walk without shirt (for men) or footwear, but Malayalis frequently ignore this requirement.

<sup>10</sup>This offering, called *snanam piradakshinam*, was performed later by one member of our party, Vishnu. Waterstone (1989:31) reports that about a quarter of his fellow pilgrims performed it, but his group travelled out of season when the temple area is much less busy.

action in the crush, but it was hard to feel that it had been satisfactory, amidst all the pushing.

We then rested for an hour or so - we found a spot near the main temple pond which was not too crowded. Before long, however, we were ready to join the queue for early morning darshan of Ayyappan. This queue, as it turned out, moved much more slowly. You have to approach the shrine from some other steps when you are not bringing an *irumudi*. It was light by the time we saw the image, once again for only a brief moment. After this, there was another queue to join; this one hopelessly long, slow and jostling. It was for collecting appam, small yellow cakes, which comprise the *prasadam*, food returned from the deity to the pilgrim. We decided that a division of labour was necessary because of the extent of the queue in front of the Prasadam Office. Consequently one of our party was dispatched to take the Ganapati offerings to Ganapati's shrine, our *guruswami* took the turmeric with some rice to Maalikappuratta Amma's<sup>11</sup> shrine, both of these were on the other side of the main shrine area, whilst the rest of us queued in front of the Prasadam Office.

Everyone felt that the division of labour was necessary because of the waiting time, though, of course, it is not wholly satisfactory to have to do this. Sufficient prasadam could be collected to share out amongst all the pilgrims, so that everyone would have a portion to take away with him. This done, we set off down the hill, our *irumudis* now tucked away, with some refreshments, into a shoulder bag. We were back at the Pampa River at about nine o'clock in the morning. There was then a rather tired drive back to Changanacherry. Our driver, the owner of the car, had rested beside the Pampa throughout our visit to the temple.

Once back in the village, some prasadam was placed in an *irumudi* in the pandal - it would later be offered to neighbours. A camphor flame was lit by the *guruswami* and waved before this *irumudi* and also in front of the picture of Ayyappan. The *guruswami* then removed the *mala* from around each pilgrim's neck. The pilgrimage was thereby concluded and, after a brief rest, the journey back to Ernakulam was completed by train.

My second pilgrimage to Sabarimala contrasted with the first because it was undertaken with a large party which departed in a bus from the Ayyappan temple of our neighbourhood. Participants had performed the departure rituals beforehand, mostly on the previous day, either in their homes or in the temple itself under the

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<sup>11</sup>She is also known as Lila, which can be rendered as 'play' or 'illusion'. Rolling a coconut around the shrine of the goddess is the most popular offering. There are also shrines to the snake deities Nagaraja and Nagayakshi.

guidance of one of the priests. I did the latter. A party of this size could, of course, achieve a considerable volume of noise in crying out the invocations for Ayyappan as we drove along. En route, there were stops for worship at the famous Siva temples of Ettumanoor and Vaikom. There was some time at Erumeli to visit Vavar's mosque and the Ayyappan temple there, as we had done the previous year. For the most part, pilgrims made the walking ascent from the Pampa in small sub-groups, comprising family and friends. In this respect, the passengers on the bus did not constitute a significantly integrated, single pilgrimage party. Travelling together was as much a matter of convenience as anything else, though the communal chanting creates a certain sense of shared excitement.

For the second pilgrimage, most of the participants were Izhavas, though some Nayars were present as well. In this respect it was similar to the first journey, but on a larger scale. The second journey also took place early in the season, this time in late November. In principle, I would have been interested in making a later pilgrimage, having travelled in early December on the previous occasion. However, Malayalis often say that they want to avoid the later period because of the overwhelming numbers of out of state pilgrims. At the climax of the season, in mid-January, a light called the *Markara Vilakku* is seen on top of a mountain beyond the temple area. There is also a star above it. They are said to indicate the presence of Ayyappan. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims come to witness them. Whatever my own preference might have been, a pilgrimage in the later part of the season would have been impossible for the second occasion because my fieldwork period was coming to an end.



## **Different Categories of Hindu Pilgrimage.**

We have seen that the Sivagiri pilgrimage makes a statement on behalf of a particular Hindu caste whilst, at the same time, providing an opportunity for individual pilgrims to feel that they are acquiring spiritual merit, and may be blessed in practical ways, by their undertaking. The question of how far Sri Narayana Guru can be said to provide this-worldly boons for supplicants is left ambiguous in "official" pronouncements, for example in printed programmes. However, he is certainly popularly regarded as possessing such power. In this regard, there is no ambiguity in Jacobite thinking concerning the powers of the deceased Patriarch (or other bishop-saints). Small details aside, however, the two pilgrimages can be said to comprise strikingly parallel phenomena, notably in the manner of their organisation. For this reason, I count them both as category one, "community" pilgrimages.

The Sabarimala pilgrimage is not dominated by any particular community; indeed, as we have seen, people of all castes and religions are supposed to take part. As with category one pilgrimages, however, there is the firm conviction that pilgrims will benefit both spiritually and, according to many, in practical ways. This issue is explored by Daniel (1984: 278-87) and we will return to it in the next chapter. For the present context, the important point is that pilgrims generally make their own arrangements to form groups, bring their own provisions, decide the route and so forth. They do this in the expectation that the pilgrimage is an intrinsically worthwhile undertaking. It is not done to show support for any cause, or solidarity with any community. In this respect, the Sabarimala pilgrimage resembles that to Malayattur. In fact, the latter is sometimes called, as we have noted, the "Christian Sabarimala". Both are category two pilgrimages in my terminology.

One difference between Sabarimala and Malayattur might be suggested. It was commented, in the introductory chapter, that Daniel (1984:255) stated that distinctions between castes are lost whilst performing the Sabarimala pilgrimage, which could be said to indicate the emergence of *communitas*. There were no obvious parallels to this amongst the Malayattur pilgrims which I encountered. This appears to be a significant difference. However, my own suggestion would be that such social processes are probably possible for both pilgrimages, but less likely for Malayattur because there is almost no emphasis on a public, shared period of spiritual preparation and less interest in arranging large groups with a diverse membership. Some Catholic churches arrange parties which undertake a gruelling walk from the home church to the hill, before making the ascent at Malayattur itself. There is, in these cases, attention to careful organisation, with full cycles of prayers

said whilst walking, and full symbolic elaboration including appropriate clothing, carrying crosses and so forth. But these are not the mixed-caste, mixed-religion groups which are said to characterise Sabarimala pilgrimages.

In practice, however, the period of preparation is often not strictly observed for Sabarimala pilgrims, and even large bus parties may function as though they were aggregates of separate private parties rather than single social units. This means that whilst normative *communitas* may be proclaimed for both pilgrimages - and this *is* especially evident for Sabarimala, all publications and many participants emphasise the removal of caste barriers and inter-religious differences - in practice, both are becoming "diluted" with decreased likelihood of significant processes of social transformation amongst participants. Complaints about the events becoming diluted are often heard. This motivates some pilgrims to swim against the current of change by deliberately retaining maximum observance of traditional conduct for the pilgrimages. More frequently, it leads many to bemoan the fact that the pilgrimages are becoming unduly "modernised". This process includes, in particular, overdevelopment of the sacred sites themselves.

The problem of the loss of character of pilgrimages is an issue which is discussed in Kerala for many holy sites. However, it is particularly likely to raise passions in the case of category two pilgrim centres. These are, after all, supposed to be associated with symbolically elaborated pilgrimage journeys which are arduous but, in the end, beneficial. Many people, including priests, pilgrims and sometimes politicians, express concern that the journeys are no longer undertaken in the appropriate spirit. It is said to be disrespectful, for example, to ascend the holy eighteen steps carrying an *irumudi* at Sabarimala if the individual has not observed the appropriate preparations. Such complaints are less likely to be heard for category one pilgrimages. For these, a degree of orderliness and appropriate conduct, at least during the journey itself, is more easily imposed. They are occasions which are very carefully organised in almost all respects, with officials and volunteers monitoring events at all times.

The complaint that sites themselves are being spoiled by overdevelopment is frequently encountered. I have heard people say that Sabarimala is no longer "in the jungle" but "in a concrete jungle". As we saw, there is now artificial illumination to guide you up Malayattur at night. Disquiet about such changes to the holy places may be found for pilgrim centres within each category, including category three sites which are not significantly associated with a journeying process. However, such complaints are somewhat less likely for category one locations. Since these are

associated with one main community, it may be easier to establish a consensus within the particular group about appropriate policy for developing a site, although dispute remains a possibility. By contrast, category two sites are controlled, in practice, by a sub-section of those who esteem the holy place, whether Syro-Malabar Catholics for Malayattur, or the upper-caste dominated Temple Board for Sabarimala. Many ordinary devotees feel that decisions are made by people with whom they have little sympathy, possibly just for reasons of financial gain. Since these sites are often supposed to be remote places - in the forest, on top of a mountain - and this is partly why the journeys to them are held to be intrinsically meritorious in the first place, their character is easily spoiled.

There is a clear reason for the development of facilities at pilgrim centres beside the financial motive of investing to stimulate further offerings. There is the fact that alterations to a site which make it appear more prestigious, with a huge church, pilgrim's hostel or whatever, and which make it, perhaps, more convenient, are advantageous because pilgrim centres are in competition with each other. Pilgrims who do not like Manjnikara, for example, may decide, thenceforth, to go to Parumala. Pilgrims to a Hindu site such as Sivagiri may decide to go to the tomb of a Christian saint, or possibly vice versa, if they are not satisfied with the experience of visiting the former. It is a matter of winning and retaining the loyalty of devotees. At the same time that more and more pilgrims are visiting sites, due to improved transport facilities and also active government promotion of pilgrimage-tourism, competition between sites is becoming an increasingly serious matter. This is partly due to increased politicisation of pilgrimage.

The politicisation of pilgrimage in Kerala can be illustrated by considering Sabarimala. We have seen that this pilgrimage was supposed to appeal to both Hindus and Muslims as well as others. In practice, I encountered few Muslims who participated. It was often suggested that the reason for this was a hardening of religious boundaries in the wake of the Ayodhya dispute. As a result of severe Hindu-Muslim antagonism over this North Indian site, which resulted in the destruction of a centuries-old mosque with subsequent rioting across India and much loss of life, pilgrimage is regarded as a potentially sensitive issue (see Van der Veer 1994:119-28). Strident voices within both communities maintain that devout followers (of either faith) should be motivated to cherish and protect their own holy sites. In view of this, it would be said, they have no business diverting their attentions elsewhere.

In the case of Sabarimala, the Ayodhya dispute is offered as a reason for reduced interest on the part of Muslims for making the pilgrimage. Many Hindu participants, it should be said, remain motivated to visit Vavar's mosque at Erumeli. But this is a very brief stop which is sufficiently integrated into the cult to retain few obvious Muslim motifs. The pilgrims simply view Vavar's swords inside the mosque and may collect some ash as *prasadam*. There is, in fact, a small enclosure honouring Vavar which is located a short distance in front of the holy steps at Sabarimala itself, but most pilgrims seem to miss this. Furthermore, the Ayyappan cult itself became embroiled in a bitter dispute between Hindus and Christians in Kerala which mirrored, to some degree, the Ayodhya problem. The Christian Churches proposed to build a church honouring St Thomas at Nilackal. Many Hindus objected to this because the site was within the domain of Ayyappan's traditional forest kingdom around Sabarimala.

The dispute between Hindus and Christians over Nilackal became intense. One reason for this was that Nilackal is one of the seven sites reputed to have had a church founded by St. Thomas himself. A cross was "discovered", apparently in an overgrown thicket, by a Christian; this was said to indicate the exact site of the church founded by St. Thomas. On the part of the Christians, the plan was to make a newly constructed church which would be an ecumenical pilgrim centre, over which all the principal denominations would have control. This had the result that most of the Christian community became united in opposition to a large section of Hindus. Nilackal became known as "Kerala's Ayodhya". Eventually, a compromise solution was reached in which the State Government offered a plot of land to the Christians which was somewhat away from the original site and outside of Ayyappan's kingdom. Violence and loss of life were avoided, but some antagonism remained and has produced a hardening of boundaries between the two religions. For example, Jacobites are often told by their clergy that they should not visit Sabarimala, in part because to visit any Hindu temple would be regarded as "unChristian", but also because some bitterness has remained, in this particular case, following the Nilackal dispute. [Vaidyanathan (1992:186-7) has some discussion of the Nilackal problem].

The politicisation of pilgrimage which we have been exploring here can be regarded as a manifestation of a deepening of divisions between different communities as religion, in general, has become increasingly politicised. In part, these developments can be regarded as a product of the pursuit of particular, perhaps rather self-seeking, agendas by politicians and political parties. The Nilackal disputes, which occurred in 1983, encouraged some politicians in Kerala to position themselves in such a way as

to gain maximum benefit from currying favour with an appropriate group within the dispute. However, it is also the case that the various caste and church organisations have become increasingly sophisticated in their attempts to manipulate the media in order to highlight their concerns. Pilgrimage is, as we have seen, an especially suitable vehicle for this, and thereby becomes embroiled in ongoing controversies. We have discussed the fact that Jacobites are in dispute with Catholicos-side Orthodox. In addition, Izhavas have a grievance resulting from some persistence of prejudice, as they see it, amongst Nayars and other high-caste Hindus. The continuing opposition of Jacobite and Izhava communities to objectionable practices, from their perspective, of other, possibly more powerful, groups, sustains their use of pilgrimage as an effective means of making a political statement.

There are, of course, many other Hindu pilgrim centres in Kerala which could be discussed to illustrate the differences between the three categories of pilgrimage; as well as some differences within the categories. In the area near to Ernakulam, for example, there is Kodungallur. This is a much discussed destination of Hindu pilgrimage, almost notorious for its association with drunkenness, obscene songs and, formerly, cock sacrifice (Induchudan 1969). It is a category two centre, associated with a highly elaborated process of symbolic journeying. Entry into the temple itself is not regarded as especially important, and, in fact, the temple is closed at the time of the most important pilgrimage. It contrasts interestingly with Sabarimala. It is more popular with members of the so-called scheduled castes and also with women, for whom there is no restriction. However, no single community is dominant. Guruvayur, by contrast, is the most famous pilgrim centre of the area which is not associated with ritualised journeying, though many people visit it en route to Sabarimala. It is regarded as a bastion of Brahminical orthodoxy. Non-Hindus are emphatically excluded; again, a notable contrast to Sabarimala. Alwaye is another category three site; there is no elaborated journeying, members of almost all Hindu castes come here to perform *bali*, "sacrifice" in honour of ancestors. It is particularly important for Izhavas because they perform the rites at an ashram founded by Sri Narayana Guru himself. There is a constellation of pilgrim centres scattered throughout Central Kerala, some resembling each other, some forming contrasting pairs. They all add to the choice, the varieties of pilgrimage experience, available to the prospective pilgrim.

We have now explored pilgrimage journeys within Central Kerala which are of two main types - categories one and two. We have seen that there are prominent examples of each type from both Christian and Hindu traditions, although it has been

emphasised that one particular group, Jacobite Christians, are especially notable for their enthusiasm for category one, community pilgrimages. We should now explore these occasions more fully, from the point of view of the people who participate in them. What is significant about the experience of undertaking pilgrimage, what does it mean to the people who do it and why does it matter?

## TWO CONTRASTING HINDU PILGRIMAGES:

### Sivagiri

#### The destination:

To the tomb of a modern holy man (died 1928)

Sri Narayana Guru is considered to have been a leader of the Izhava caste

In a town near the coast

#### The journey:

walking all the way (some people go by bus)

pilgrimage party moves as one large unit

departs on one particular day (length varies; three days for speeches and lectures at Sivagiri itself)

party is accompanied by decorated chariot and flags

pilgrims wear yellow robes

popular songs, often composed by Sri Narayana Guru, sung

stops at sites associated with Sri Narayana movement - refreshments offered

interaction with onlookers, many of whom offer refreshments

### Sabarimala

To the temple of a deity. Temple said to be very ancient

said to be popular with all castes and religions - no one group predominates

On a mountain in the high ranges

most take bus up to Pampa River and walk last few kilometres, some take long forest trail

many separate parties converge at the site

there is a season, with the final day most popular

pilgrims carry *irumudi*, two-pouch bundle of offerings, on head

pilgrims wear black, orange, green or blue robes

repetitive chanting in response to a leader

brief stops at one or two known landmarks (e.g. first-timers place arrow by tree)

no interaction with onlookers (away from settlement)

#### Organisation and Provision:

carefully organised by ashrams and trusts associated with Sri Narayana Movement

private and neighbourhood groups organise themselves, although bus trips arranged by some commercial operators

accommodation and meals arranged for participants

participants make their own arrangements

receptions on arrival and procession on following morning are usual

No reception or processions for pilgrims at site (image of deity occasionally taken on procession)

publicity is arranged to attract participants and volunteers

some enthusiasts promote the pilgrimage, but it is extensively publicised in media in any case

#### Worship and Activities at Site:

money offerings given;

ghee-filled coconut is main offering, money is given as well;

statue of Guru is venerated; last place he stayed is also viewed

dashan of image of Ayyappan, but very rushed

attending lectures and meetings considered no meetings of any kind  
important

Participants:

mostly Izhavas, a few members of lower castes almost all Hindu castes, some Muslims and Christians

pilgrims emphasise the importance for their community of conveying the Guru's message, spiritual merit and personal blessings may be hoped for pilgrims stress personal blessings and spiritual merit

pilgrimage has features of *jatha* and *yatha* *yatra* only

Impact of Change:

care is taken to preserve the character and "seriousness" of the event (though it is sometimes said to be too politicised) many complain that the site is becoming over-developed and the journey is becoming too easy, it is not treated with sufficient seriousness

features common to both:

should be a period of spiritual preparation and abstinence from meat, liquor and sex - both involve elements of renunciation which imitate the honoured figure (Sri Narayana Guru or Ayyappan); buying of souvenirs; some disputes over management of sites.



## The Sivagiri Pilgrimage



The pilgrimage party, with leader holding yellow flag and boy carrying holy ash, soon after departure.



A stop to pay respects to one of the many statues of Sri Narayana Guru passed en route.



## The Sabarimala Pilgrimage



Pilgrims walk past the shops and snack bars beside the Pampa River before beginning climb to temple area.



Pilgrims ascend the holy eighteen steps; early morning, an unusually uncrowded time.

## Summary of Chapter Six

Chapter six describes two contrasting Hindu pilgrimages. The pilgrimage to Sivagiri, burial place of Sri Narayana Guru, is shown to parallel the Jacobite pilgrimages. It makes a statement on behalf of the main community which is involved, the Izhava caste. It is a well-organised walking journey (some people also travel by motor transport) in which there is interaction with onlookers, provision of refreshments and hospitality, and a sense of attainment of spiritual well-being - with possible practical blessings - on the part of participants. It educates people about the teachings of the Guru. Lectures and discussions on his message and on issues facing the community are held at Sivagiri.

The Sabarimala pilgrimage, by contrast, is not dominated by any particular caste and is, in fact, supposed to attract people of all communities and religions. Women of reproductive age are, however, barred. In a number of respects, it parallels Malayattur. Most people join locally-organised pilgrimage parties, sometimes travelling with just one or two friends. In principle, there should be a lengthy period of spiritual preparation, with abstinence from liquor, meat and sex and no shaving or idle chatter. In practice, this is seldom strictly observed by Malayalis now. A departure ritual is performed in which pilgrims fill a two-pouch bundle of offerings. Most then take motor transport up to the Pampa River and walk the remaining few kilometres from there. For most people, this is not very strenuous. Some pilgrims undertake the much longer forest trail. The temple area itself is usually very crowded and worship consequently very rushed. The journey is characterised by "normative communitas" but "existential communitas" is less evident. Complaints are frequently heard about dilution of the character of the pilgrimage, with the temple area becoming over-developed and the journey approached, it is said, with insufficient seriousness. Central Kerala has many important Hindu pilgrim centres, some of which contrast notably with Sabarimala.

## CHAPTER 7

### **AUTOPHENOMENOLOGY AND HETEROPHENOMENOLOGY: PILGRIMAGE AS EXPERIENTIAL PROCESS**

## **Daniel, "Fluid Signs" and Peircean Phenomenology.**

In order to understand the experience of pilgrimage, and what it means to those who participate, I propose to take a phenomenological approach. By this, I mean an approach which attempts to make explicit the "phenomena", the detailed contents, of experience. These are conveyed both by my own accounts of the pilgrimages and by the comments and narratives of informants. Various aspects of the experience can thereby be assessed in order to determine their likely significance for participants. Factors which influence the pilgrimage process, including motives and retrospective interpretations, can become apparent as well as wider implications.

Phenomenological methods were first developed by philosophers, notably Husserl (1970, 1977) and, later, Jaspers (1963). The latter applied the technique to the investigation of psychopathology. My own perspective has been most influenced by the work of Merleau-Ponty, whose ideas will be explored and applied in the next chapter. For the moment, it is sufficient to emphasise that the aim is to detail as fully as possible the experiential quality of the pilgrimages for participants. This requires taking full account of the behavioural, social and symbolic contexts, of course, because experience does not stand apart from behavioural performance, social interaction or symbolic activity but is embedded in them.

It would be useful to consider, in some detail, the work of an ethnographer who has attempted to develop an understanding of pilgrimage from a phenomenological perspective. This is E.V. Daniel in his book "Fluid Signs: Being a Person the Tamil Way" (Daniel 1984). This account is especially relevant for the present discussion because it concerns one of the principal pilgrimages with which I am acquainted, that to Sabarimala. In fact, Daniel accompanied a party of Tamils from the village in which he was based, rather than Malayalis. However, they followed the traditional route from Erumeli, with all the usual preparations and rituals.

Daniel's work has been strongly influenced by the writings of the American philosopher C.S. Peirce, the originator of pragmatism. Writing as about the same time as Husserl, Peirce gives a central role to phenomenology in his work, but in a way which is different from, though related to, that of Husserl. Like his German counterpart, Peirce changed his philosophy a number of times. Unlike Husserl, however, he never seems to have regarded phenomenology as a field which is more basic than, say, logic or ethics. This has the advantage, at least from the standpoint of later twentieth century philosophy, that he treated the problem of meaning -or "semiotics" - as a significant field, related to phenomenology but requiring attention

in its own right. Daniel has also maintained a strong interest in meaning and signification in his work.

Peirce divided philosophy into phenomenology, normative science (aesthetics, ethics and logic) and metaphysics. Phenomenology was understood to be all that could appear before the mind. In practice, Peirce was mostly concerned to show that all phenomenal experience could be resolved into three categories, with which he had had a longstanding preoccupation.<sup>12</sup> The categories are called "firstness", "secondness" and "thirdness".

Firstness is pure quality. It is not a concept; it could be called the phenomenal "suchness" of a sensation. For example, that which leads us to classify an object as red is a quality, but this is not equivalent to the concept red. There is a directness in one's perception of it. Secondness, by contrast, could be called "upagainstness". It is the possibility of the dynamic interaction of two things - action and resistance - with its implied individuation of objects, and of selves. This is the domain of simple states of affairs, and the effort required to manage them. For example, if I am now walking down the steps to reach the street from my flat, this would be a straightforward state of secondness. Thirdness is the realm of connections, relations and generality. At the level of experience thirdness is, above all, thought and rationality. There is a slightly mysterious quality to it, because it both characterizes thought and things; in the world it is displayed as the purposefulness or lawfulness of nature (see Peirce to Lady Welby in Wiener (ed) 1958:383-90).

Daniel regards Peirce's phenomenological categorization as a useful schema. He uses it to contrast Western epistemology, with its emphasis upon scientific method, on the one hand, with the ideas of Hindu philosophy, on the other. According to Daniel, the Western emphasis upon scientific rationalism privileges thirdness as a means of controlling the awkward encounters of secondness, whilst devaluing firstness. Hindu philosophy reverses this, he says, (Daniel 1984:244-5).

The Sabarimala pilgrimage is said, by Daniel, to provide an opportunity to break out of the realm of thirdness, which is necessarily predominant in mundane, day to day existence, in India as elsewhere. By passing through a period characterized by overwhelming secondness, one can arrive at a final state of firstness. This is Daniel's Peircean conception of the process of shedding worldly concerns and the natural

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<sup>12</sup> Peirce used the word "ideoscopy" as well; by this he meant the classification of the ideas of ordinary experience into three categories. This is discussed in a letter to Lady Welby of October 12 1904, reproduced in *Values in a Universe of Chance; Selected Writings of Charles S. Peirce* edited by Philip P. Wiener (Wiener (ed) 1958).

disposition to control situations encountered during the pilgrimage, until one resigns oneself to the ever more powerful experiences (especially increasing pain) and so becomes indifferent even to this and attains a simple sense of love for Ayyappan. This is held to be a subjective union of oneself with the higher reality. It is attainment of firstness, in Daniel's schema.

One can ask of Daniel's account, is the use of Peirce's terminology appropriate as a characterisation of spiritual progress? And, even if it is, is this actually what pilgrims experience? As regards the first question, making a contrast between Peircean and Tamil/Hindu epistemology is an interesting exercise in comparative philosophy but it is debatable whether the "official" philosophy of the Sabarimala pilgrimage which Daniel has expounded in fact corresponds closely to an inverted Peircean schema as he claims. The central component of the pilgrimage philosophy is an account of layers of body sheaths which are said to make up the self. This is a cosmology/physiology on which pilgrims can be instructed before they depart. The philosophy, as applied to the pilgrimage, holds that over successive years of journeying to Sabarimala the pilgrim can shed eighteen layers of his or her self. This is symbolised by the holy eighteen steps leading to the main shrine. The result of this is that the pilgrim becomes "completely free to fuse with the Lord in permanent union on the nineteenth year" (Daniel 1984:277). The process of shedding the layers of the self is achieved as a result of suffering pain, which displaces all minor sensations and appetites such as hunger, anger and so forth. The pain can only be conquered by love. This is love for Ayyappan, which grows so strong that even it "must burst or swallow itself so that at the point of union with the Lord no sensation should exist, even that of love" (ibid:257, quoting his group leader).

Daniel's use of the Peircean categories is questionable in several respects. He regards the subjective sense of union with the Lord as firstness. But firstness can be attributed to any quality provided that it is sensed in an unmediated fashion, including, presumably, the bad smells which Daniel dislikes, if experienced in a sufficiently direct manner. Firstness cannot be just an attribute of attractive qualities, though it may be easier to think of it this way. Daniel acknowledges this of pain (ibid:268). Firstness is generally a more mundane matter than moksha which can be encountered at any time; it is not clear that progress towards moksha is equivalent to movement towards greater firstness.

Conversely, secondness is not merely those senses of "upagainstness" induced by the unpleasant (pain, smell etc.) to which one struggles to become indifferent, but it applies to any situation of individuation, a division into self and other. Therefore it



would probably include taking darshan of the deity at the shrine. Although people are profoundly moved by the sight of Ayyappan, they nonetheless report seeing him as an "other", at least in conversation with me. This is especially the case if they prostrate, crawl or roll near the image. It probably applies if pilgrims see the self-revelation of Ayyappan, the light on the hill at Markara Vilakku. At any rate, they are unlikely to lose a sense of the otherness of fellow pilgrims in the pushing and jostling to get a view of the image. "You barely have time to wave at the Lord", as one pilgrim said to me. Secondness remains; it is not clear that the pilgrimage achieves a steady progression away from it.

As regards thirdness, one can say that the collection of *prasadam* in order to distribute it at home, as well as purchasing of souvenirs, is an example of purposive, means-end, "control-oriented" action, although it takes place at the conclusion of the pilgrimage, beside the holy shrine. Thirdness remains as well.

These comments raise more general questions about how far the experiences of pilgrims actually resemble the rather idealized conception put forward by Daniel, regardless of whether it is expressed in the form of Hindu philosophy or Peircean categories. In my experience, pilgrims are anxious about getting *prasadam* and souvenirs - not mentioned by Daniel - but they are not concerned about dirty bathing water which horrified him. Even Daniel himself noted that many pilgrims are indifferent to, or amused by, the unhygienic pools. He, however, seems to be most struck by those things which connect with his theory-laden preoccupation with knowing, a theme which is not prominent in the concerns of other pilgrims. One even rebuked him: "You know only about all our knowledges. You have come here with us only to try and know how we know, but you really don't know" (ibid:259). This suggests that Daniel has been asking inappropriate questions - his emphasis on the "how" of knowing stops him knowing. His narrative is strongly coloured by his own interests and experiences. When he does introduce the comments of other pilgrims, it seems to be in a context of their being obliged to respond to his own preoccupations (see, for example, ibid:268). In short, Daniel's account is very "auto-phenomenological".

The term "autophenomenology" derives from Dennett who distinguishes it from "heterophenomenology". In making a plea for more careful description of the other, Dennett says that whilst Husserl et al "propose that one can get to one's own notional world by some special somewhat introspectionist bit of mental gymnastics", he (Dennett) is concerned with "determining the notional world of another, from the outside. The tradition of Brentano and Husserl is auto-phenomenology; I am



proposing heterophenomenology", (Dennett 1987:153). Dennett's reference to "mental gymnastics" reflects his scepticism about how far one can bracket out all assumptions and pre-conceptions in describing one's own experience. He is probably right to wonder about this, which is a good reason for allowing subjects to speak for themselves, where possible. At least we should not shape their responses to fit our own concerns with theory-laden questions.

Of course, it can be difficult to encourage people to talk at length during pilgrimage. Many people become quiet when tired. This means that the process of exploring the experiences and reflections of others requires follow-up conversations. Such retrospective discussions are obviously not identical to the process of doing pilgrimage. Nevertheless, a recollection of experience can be evoked in conversation; often the use of photographs can help. Seasoned pilgrims can also comment on similarities and differences noticed between experiences over a number of occasions. People are able to formulate a version of "what they really felt"; perhaps decide how far they may have felt the same as some other person. Retrospective discussion provides an opportunity for pilgrims to comment on the significance of the journey for their wider life. I am sceptical, therefore, about how far a balanced account of pilgrimage can be achieved without carefully pursuing a heterophenomenological perspective. This entails plenty of careful and, one hopes, sensitive interviewing outside of the performance of the pilgrimage. The information so gathered can be placed alongside a record of one's own subjective and personal experiences of the event.

As a result of being strongly autophenomenological, Daniel's account, whilst interesting, seems to me to distort the ethnography. It would be worth specifying the details of this. He valorizes philosophical wisdom in contrast to popular understanding. This is probably reinforced by his frequent reference to the comments of Brahmins (for example *ibid*: 258-60) without equivalents for pilgrims of middle or lower castes. In fact, it is the latter which predominate on the Sabarimala pilgrimage. They might, consciously or otherwise, dissociate themselves from the point of view of Brahmins. In addition, Daniel glosses over the details of the journey, except for the bits he found particularly unpleasant (dirty bathing pools, steep and stony paths). Consequently, the account does not match very closely with my own experiences or, more importantly, those of my informants.

The gradual process of achieving union with the Lord, in Daniel's account, contrasts with a sense of sudden encounter with Ayyappan on the journey, which has been reported to me by some pilgrims, as we shall see. It is clearly important to them that

they have a sense of Ayyappan's continuous presence during the journey, as a result of which he can reveal himself unexpectedly at a critical moment. Therefore, the pilgrimage is not only a journey to the Lord, it is also, at all times, a journey with the Lord. In connection with this, pilgrims sometimes report experiencing a waxing and waning of pleasant and unpleasant aspects of the pilgrimage. Prasad, as we shall see, had considerable difficulties on the first day, but felt that a spiritual encounter with Ayyappan enabled him to continue on to the shrine with relatively little difficulty thereafter.

Another important matter is the desire for practical blessings. This is mentioned by Daniel; "some (exceptionally few) said that they were going to obtain mental peace; others expected some material gain from Lord Ayyappan upon the successful completion of the pilgrimage; still others said it was a mini experience in motcam" (ibid:258). No further details are given, despite the fact that praying for, and receiving, blessings is a very prominent theme. Pilgrims may "go quiet" on this matter later in the pilgrimage, but this is likely to be as a result of tiredness, I would suggest, rather than because of a readjustment of their hopes for the pilgrimage. Perhaps there might be some change in attitude to personal problems - a more philosophical sense of "thy will be done" concerning, for example, a hoped-for childbirth.

During the pilgrimage, and especially afterwards, pilgrims often reflect on possible blessings which might result from their journey. This is the case for all the pilgrimages with which I am familiar. Pilgrims may temporarily stop thinking about these matters whilst making the journey. This does not alter the fact that it will remain a major reason for their making the journey year after year. Whilst powerful experiences such as pain, love of the Lord and fatigue may come to dominate their conscious awareness, they cannot be said to cease to hope that Ayyappan will provide blessings for daily life. Their conception of the pilgrimage may be broadened, no doubt, but I do not think that this aspect is erased.

Perhaps my different ethnographic emphases reflect the fact that my fellow pilgrims were Malayalis, whilst Daniel's were Tamils. It might be the case that Tamils are, on average, more "purist" and painstaking in their attitude to the pilgrimage. There certainly are many Malayalis who take a somewhat casual attitude, taking a short period of *vratham*, travelling with only one or two others, almost as a day-trip. But, equally, there are others who approach the undertaking with great seriousness, observing all aspects of the preparation, and walking from Erumeli, the start of the long route, if not from their homes. I have taken particular note of the reports of such

pilgrims. Daniel's different emphasis is a consequence of his own interests, I suspect, more than a reflection of a particular perspective amongst his fellow pilgrims. Nonetheless, I would acknowledge that part of the fascination of pilgrimage lies in the fact that different individuals bring different expectations to it, and have different, but often overlapping, experiences. There may be degrees of approximation to Daniel's account, or my own for that matter.

In this discussion, I have considered Daniel's account at length, and would draw the following methodological conclusion; a strongly subjective and autophenomenological account of doing pilgrimage is likely to be most useful if it can be readily compared with the experiences of others; that is, if it can be supplemented by at least a partial heterophenomenological perspective. For example, Daniel's account is best when describing pain, for instance in the feet, which is an experience with which I or my informants could easily identify. In fact one can see this pain manifest itself, unambiguously, in the behaviour of others. The same can be said for the discomfort from the *irumudi* pressing on the head, or from the heat of the sun. Another good description is of the singing of the devotional songs, where the pilgrims' responses become automatic regardless of whether it is the appropriate leader who has called out (ibid 264-6). This is another matter which most pilgrims will experience, and readily observe.

In the following sub-section, I will pursue a largely autophenomenological enquiry, in the sense that it derives from, in the first instance, my own experiences of doing pilgrimage. However, these have been supplemented by observation as well as, sometimes, asking explicit questions. This reflects my view that some aspects of the pilgrimage experience are more or less universal - everyone has them - and can be treated as such. After these have been explored, more personal and individual aspects can be pursued by considering what pilgrims say about their own experiences.

## **Autophenomenology and General Characteristics of Pilgrimage Experience.**

The previous section has drawn attention to the fact that whilst a strongly personal and subjective narrative of an author's pilgrimage can be vivid, care must be taken in drawing conclusions from such an account. It is true that some experiences can, without controversy, be said to be representative, shared by almost all people. For example, one could hardly fail to be impressed by the crowdedness of many pilgrim centres or struck by the lilting quality of some of the pilgrimage songs. On the other hand, other experiences will be much more individual and private; for example Daniel's reaction to filthy bathing water, or my own intense dislike of sudden bursts of rain. The significance of such personal reactions can only be assessed by placing them in a wider, heterophenomenological context; by being concerned with accounts of others.

We can say that there are two types of experience of concern for us, which we can call the "phenomenologically general" and the "phenomenologically particular". We will explore the latter by attending, shortly, to the stories of a number of pilgrim informants. Exclusive attention to the author's own reactions could become ethnocentric - a criticism which can be made of Daniel's account - unless it is argued that these are experiences shared by all participants. However, since there clearly are some such general characteristics, they can be specified first.

The general aspects of pilgrimage experience can be conveniently categorised according to the basic forms of sensory perception, seeing, hearing and so forth. We can emphasise, therefore, the fact that there are certain things which all people *see* when participating in the pilgrimage. Everyone sees the changes in the landscape as they traverse it. There is movement from towns to villages to remote areas, from paddy fields to mountains or from inland to the coast. Everyone sees the changes associated with the weather, bright or dull conditions, as well as the diurnal cycle, morning, evening, night. These provide the characteristic qualities of each pilgrimage experience. They add to the beauty and awe of the occasion; particularly striking, for example, was the evening light as the sun set behind the small hillock on which the church was sited, as we approached it at the very end of the Manjinikara pilgrimage.

Other reactions are characteristically stimulated by the things seen during pilgrimage. There is apprehension: Will I be able to get up that hill? Can we really walk in total darkness? The appearance of the multiple holy places, both en route and at the destination, may be overwhelming or it may be simple. Many pilgrim centres

convey mystique and grandeur, often enhanced by decorations. There is the imposing position of Kothamangalam Church on its spacious forecourt, there is the tall, gently rounded shape of the main monument at Sivagiri. The altars of many of the old Syrian churches are beautiful and striking. Malayattur Church has spectacular views of the surrounding landscape, and its enormous golden cross inside.

Especially important for participants is the sight of their fellow pilgrims. There is the sheer number of them, their manifest determination despite exhaustion and their variety. Some pilgrims are especially conspicuous, in particular garb, carrying large offerings, perhaps crawling. This can generate a powerful empathy and shared emotion, a theme to be considered later. There are also the symbolic objects which pilgrims take with them, flags, badges and the pictures of saints. The last of these have a particular significance because as you look up, periodically, and see the large portrait of a saint, which is usually carried on a decorated chariot or other vehicle, it not only reminds you that the pilgrimage honours that individual, but it also conveys a sense of a holy presence, accompanying the pilgrims and watching them, at least in spirit.

There is also the importance of seeing the saint or deity at the destination. The mysterious, shining gold colour of Ayyappan's image at Sabarimala is very striking, as is the beautiful serenity of the large statue of Sri Narayana Guru at Sivagiri. Although one does not see the Christian saints, in the same way, there is a definite pathos in seeing the bed on which Mar Gregorios died at Parumala. Pilgrims strain to peer at the footprint of St. Thomas at Malayattur.

The decorated chariots are not only important for carrying portraits of the saints, they also contribute significantly to the characteristic sounds of pilgrimage. We should consider next, therefore, the nature of the typical auditory experiences of pilgrimage. There are the cheerfully blaring devotional songs, usually with modern, engaging, melodies. These are repeated many times over and provide a familiar rhythmic quality to the pilgrimage, almost hypnotic in character. The same is true of chanting at Sabarimala and Malayattur, though chariots are not involved and so there is no electronic amplification. The loud modern tunes are often punctuated by periods of more traditional song, for example periods of chanted prayer at the churches visited during Jacobite and Orthodox pilgrimages. Anybody undertaking such pilgrimages would be struck by their musical and rhythmic quality; I can add by way of confirmation of this that many informants remarked, particularly, on this aspect.

Against the backdrop of these melodies and chants, the periods of silence attain an especially powerful quality. The most notable of these is the hour of silence between 2pm and 3pm on the final day of the Manjinikara pilgrimage. This corresponds, it is said, to the time at which the Patriarch passed away. It has a powerful contemplative quality. This may be present to some degree at other times, especially the quieter moments. These are the times when one stops chattering to others or to oneself and simply walks on. There is a meditative and prayerful aspect to this, most easily achieved when away from traffic and settlement. It can be a time to reflect on personal issues or on the life of the saint, but it is also a chance for a simple passive awareness, "peace of mind" as people say, marked only by the gentle rhythm of walking.

Some participants in Jacobite pilgrimage have said to me that they feel that there is now insufficient silence during these events. To some degree, I sympathize with this. It seems to be an important manner in which the pilgrimages are changing. As their popularity grows each year so there are more pilgrims and more accompanying vehicles to add to the noise. The silence can, however, be almost palpable at night. At times I felt this to be alarming, and was reassured whenever the tunes from the chariots could be heard again.

Some priests are particularly gifted in their leading of singing and chanting at the holy places. People often comment on the quality, as a performance, of a mass or other worship. Our local priest in Ernakulam was commended for being the "singing priest". The passion and clarity with which Father Thomas, leading our pilgrimage group to Parumala, sang in honour of Mar Gregorios on reaching the tomb was notable.

One of the most significant things done by pilgrims when they arrive at some of the Christian sites is to touch the tomb of the saint. This is especially so at Manjinikara and Mulanthuruthy. It provides an especially satisfying climax to one's arrival, and symbolizes perhaps an act of communion. Receiving blessings from priests and bishops involves the touch of their hand on the scalp. This is associated with many occasions apart from pilgrimage. Likewise, pilgrims usually touch the feet of their leader, or *guruswami*, and other elders before leaving for Sabarimala.

Whilst walking towards Sabarimala there is the continuous sensation of the *irumudi* pressing down on one's head. It is a burden, a load which must be carried, but it is also the method for conveying one's offering, in particular the ghee coconut, and so a means to blessing as well. And all the time there is the touch of one's fellow

pilgrims. This includes the smearing on of paint at Erumeli before leaving for Sabarimala - no untouchability on this pilgrimage, it affirms. There are the hands of friends and family steering one through the crush of jostling crowds, at almost all pilgrim centres. There is the reassuring assistance people provide to one another, to help clamber over the boulders at Malayattur, stabilise the *irumudi* or simply support the tired and infirm. Such contacts as these comprise part of the distinctive communion, and the perceptual and sensory "texture" which contributes to the significance of the pilgrimage journey.

There are of course other features of the journey conveyed by sight, sound and touch, which could be mentioned as significant for the pilgrim, some of which will be apparent from previous narrative description. Here, a few more aspects of bodily sensation will be mentioned to complete this overview of the general phenomenological character of Kerala pilgrimages. Particularly important are the various forms of discomfort, especially pain. Of course, not everyone experiences pains of the same kind and degree. To explore this further we will have to allow individual pilgrims to tell their own stories. However, it is reasonable to stress that, in some form, pain is a practically universal experience. As one of my friends said about the Manjinikara pilgrimage "everyone gets aches and pains, but they are able to carry on with the help of the Lord".

It is common for people to comment that they gained a sense of being helped through the pilgrimage by their faith, by a sense of the presence of the saint or deity. The same applies to fatigue, and to discomfort from the heat. Everyone becomes weary, longs for a shady path or the cool of evening. Of course discomfort induces emotional responses and associated thoughts - "I can't stand much more of this" or "now I feel it's a real pilgrimage". People are not identical in their reactions, quite apart from the obvious fact that people are not equally susceptible to heat exhaustion, joint pain or whatever. This is the point at which we should take account of the individuality of participants and the varied character of their pilgrimage experiences, as we shall shortly.

On arrival at the destination, or a resting point, all people experience a sense of relief at being able to stretch out and rest, revive themselves with tea or splash themselves with the cold water of the ice factory near North Paravur. The rush to the ice factory is reminiscent of Ann Gold's fellow pilgrims running excitedly into the waves, after reaching the ocean at Puri in Orissa (Gold 1988:282). But for all such situations, if we probe a bit further we can probably expect to find whole cognitive-emotional

associations triggered by certain stimuli, enabling each person to contribute their own unique sense of meaning to the pilgrimage.

All kinds of stimuli can contribute to significant subjective responses. It would be interesting, however, to consider for a moment the sense of taste and smell. Psychologists have often noted that they can elicit powerful associations. This was famously experienced by Marcel Proust, on dipping his madeleine cake into his tea (Proust 1992:51). Smells and tastes feature prominently at various points during the Kerala pilgrimages which we have discussed. There are the distinctive smells of camphor and incense during worship, as well as the taste of food received as *prasadam* (for example *payasam* at Sivagiri). There is food given as an offering to pilgrims by onlookers on the way, especially *nei-appam*, the dark treacly cake given during Jacobite pilgrimages. The exchange of offerings and gifts is, therefore, strongly associated with gustatory experience.

In addition, and this is especially clear for Proust, certain stimuli are particularly capable of eliciting, or contributing to the creation of, memories. This process is unique to each individual; not everyone would be affected by a madeleine cake. Nonetheless, the process of establishing and drawing upon memories is certainly a fundamental part of what makes pilgrimage important. There are people and places which can be revisited to revitalize the memories. Other people or places might be encountered quite casually, whilst still evoking significant memories from a previous pilgrimage - "this is where I prayed for my son's birth" or "that is the man who limped on despite his hip-pain". To assist the pilgrim's memory there are pictures of saints and deities, cassettes of devotional songs, illustrated brochures and other souvenirs to take back. In addition to this, there is talk - discussion, reflection and prayer following the journey, or before subsequent occasions. This facilitates the remembering of pilgrimage and the evaluation of it, and appraisal or elucidation of its meaning. These are certainly activities in which pilgrims enthusiastically engage - during the journey itself and especially at other times. It is a process in which the anthropologist attempting to understand pilgrimage should engage as well. We will look at the significance of this for the individual pilgrim in the next chapter.

There are many opportunities to discuss all the different features of the occasions, attempting to decide how these attain significance in the wider context of participants' lives. This requires the sort of detailed discussion with the other, trying to empathise as far as possible with what they say, which I have labelled the "heterophenomenological" approach. It is about addressing connections between the pilgrimage experience and other ongoing, usually long-term, life concerns. Of



course, these are preoccupations which vary from individual to individual, but can nevertheless often be seen as expressions of basic characteristics of the human situation. We have to attempt to make sense of the personal situations which people narrate, which they stress as the concerns which confer significance upon pilgrimage for them.

## **Hermeneutics and Heterophenomenology.**

Up to now I have emphasized general features of experience which could be expected to be shared by all participants in the pilgrimages - including, usually, myself. Confirmation of the fact that these are experienced by fellow pilgrims can be obtained from observation. One notices the obvious signs of tiredness, for example. This can be supplemented by simple verbal exchanges such as comments on the songs or the numbers of people. However, we shift now to a more heterophenomenological perspective. The focus will be upon the way in which people describe their experiences; what people say when discussing them in an extended and considered manner. In other words, we will be concerned with narrative.

It would be useful to consider how these narratives are obtained; what their "role" might be in general terms. Accounts such as these cannot usually be obtained whilst actually undertaking the pilgrimage. Walking pilgrimages are tiring. This reduces the ability of either anthropologist or fellow pilgrims to engage in considered discussion. People do narrate, briefly, incidents of importance to them - but this is hard to place in a context, especially since it is awkward attempting to turn such conversations into a more formal interview. Furthermore, you cannot write whilst walking. A small cassette recorder could be used, but this would introduce artificiality. I doubt whether it would be helpful since typically I have had brief conversations with many people, with long pauses and interruptions, which would be hard to interpret on a cassette. Finding out in detail about the thoughts and experiences of participants is an activity which must be carried out separately from the performance of the pilgrimage itself.

People with whom I became friendly during a pilgrimage could usually be contacted again afterwards. It was possible to relive the experience of the pilgrimage with them, whilst also considering wider issues and opinions. Often, other pilgrims were introduced to me as well, who added useful comments even though I might have had only the briefest exchanges with them, if at all, during the journey. In addition, there were many conversations with people known from other contexts. These were neighbours, traders, local priests or scholars, people in the bar or driving local taxis. Many of these people had stories and opinions to share concerning pilgrimage, as well as countless other topics. This, of course, is the standard repository of information for the village or neighbourhood ethnographer. These accounts are most helpful if they concern people and places with whom one is quite familiar, although even casual encounters with people who are hardly known can be illuminating.

Some of the people with whom I discussed these things in the locality came to be fellow-pilgrims on a later journey. This is a particularly valuable situation because one encounters them in both a "home" and "pilgrimage setting". Friends made during pilgrimage can also, of course, become known in their home setting, especially if they live nearby. Pilgrims who are given to making frequent journeys may become one's fellow pilgrims on several later occasions as well.

It should be acknowledged, of course, that accounts obtained in this way are retrospective narratives. Often, people explain the significance of a recent pilgrimage by drawing attention to experiences on journeys some years earlier. One should be clear, therefore, that there are two possible sources of meaning in such a narrative. There are the experiences as they occurred, that is to say as they might have been conveyed at the time if there had been an opportunity. In addition, there are those aspects which emerge in the retelling, in an opportunity to consider and construct a narrative which relates to a wider context. In drawing attention to this, we have arrived at the central problem of hermeneutics - what is the meaning of a narrative (story, text) and where does that meaning come from?

In order to consider, briefly, the hermeneutical problem in the present context, I would like to refer to a very useful essay by Guy Widdershoven (Widdershoven 1993). In his discussion, he is particularly concerned with the relationship between hermeneutics and phenomenology. Following a discussion of another incident related by Proust (not the madeleine cake), Widdershoven says "we only become aware of the significance of these experiences by telling stories about them and fusing them with other stories. In this process the pre-narrative structure of experience is articulated and changed into a narrative pattern" (ibid:4).

The "pre-narrative structure of experience" is a critical notion and corresponds, as Widdershoven points out, to the foundations - *fundierung* was Husserl's term - of experience as discussed by phenomenologists (ibid:5). Widdershoven explains this as follows "life has an implicit meaning which is made explicit in stories. Such a process of explicitation presupposes that there is already something present. What is present is, however, not just there to be uncovered. It is shaped and structured in a process of articulation" (ibid:5-6).

The question, therefore, is; how should this shaping and structuring, in the process of articulation, be conceptualised? Widdershoven considers three possible views which he relates to the perspectives of Collingwood, Gadamer and Derrida. The Collingwood view is that one can penetrate behind narratives, for example those of

historical sources, to reconstruct the original thoughts and intentions of protagonists in some particular event. This is rejected by the Gadamer perspective which argues that every interpretation creates new meaning. It can be said to do this through a dialogue between text (or narrator) and interpreter, leading, in successful dialogue, to a "fusion of horizons", a new synthesis. The Derrida perspective rejects any notion of progress or ascent in the activity of interpretation, maintaining that texts can endlessly be placed into new contexts; meaning is created indefinitely without continuity or endpoint.

It would be useful, as Widdershoven implies, to keep all three possible perspectives in mind: However, I would like to emphasise the value of Gadamer's ideas, as presented in, for example, Gadamer (1976) and discussed by Warnke (1987). There are always two interacting components, whether these are experience and narrator or narrative and researcher. They can engage in dialogue which permits a movement towards pre-reflexive experience, in the former case, or "what the speaker meant" in the latter. Of course there is no perfect interpretation, no such thing as a final attainment of the goal, but there can be a fruitful new synthesis.

Applying Gadamer's notion of dialogue, we can say that an autophenomenological narrative (for example Daniel on Sabarimala) incorporates one principal dialogical relation. This is the interaction between the pre-reflexive experiences of the pilgrimage, on the one hand, and the narrator attempting to convey them in a fixed form, on the other. This could be expressed as a dialogue between the narrator's remembered self and his or her speaking self. For the accounts which we will consider now, however, there are two dialogical relations. There is the interaction between the pilgrimage experiences and the narrator as well as that between the narrator and his or her interlocutor - in this case myself as anthropologist. One could point out a third relation which now applies between myself as participant in those earlier conversations and my text as written for the present reader.<sup>13</sup>

A significant consideration is the fact that the pilgrim usually has many other potential partners in dialogue besides the anthropologist. These include family and friends as well as internal dialogue with themselves which is, perhaps, most important. This will be explored in the next chapter. All of these dialogues comprise opportunities for developing and refining their story. The same, of course, applies to myself as I reflect upon the accounts of pilgrimage which I have accumulated, and

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<sup>13</sup>Another writer who has influenced debates in this area is Paul Ricoeur who has had a longstanding preoccupation with time, narrative and imagination as well as with the writings of leading phenomenologists (Ricoeur 1967, 1977, 1984-8; see also Kearney 1996).

try to determine which points should be emphasised in my account, and whether there are common patterns. For the moment, in evaluating the following narratives, it is appropriate to be aware of the multiple possible "fusions", interactions and refinements which will necessarily have occurred in their creation.

## Christian Pilgrims

Thomas is one of the most experienced pilgrims, of my acquaintance, to Manjinikara. He is a friend of a friend and was specifically introduced to me because of his long acquaintance with the Manjinikara pilgrimage. He belongs to a Jacobite parish to the south-east of Cochin. Each year, at the time of the pilgrimage, he sets off from a small chapel, passing by his local church, and joins the large group of assembled pilgrims at Arakunnam. This is the first day's lunch stop for many groups, including my own.

My principal interview with him was recorded during the rainy season, the middle part of the year between June and August, in 1995. This was after the main period of pilgrimage activity in which I had participated, between November 1994 and May 1995. The following narrative was presented by him in one interview session, conducted in the front of his own house. This was the usual method used for collecting the accounts presented here. For these interviews I would rely on Biju, my assistant, to act as interpreter in order both to ensure ready comprehension and to give me time to write down responses immediately. I found tape-recordings to be unsatisfactory because the presence of the machine could be intrusive at the time of the interview, and the process of transcribing was slow with the results sometimes turning out less clear than expected.

Generally, I found that my procedure worked well. All participants seemed quite relaxed most of the time, although there were occasional forced pauses as my note-taking hurried to catch up. Other conversations were, of course, much less structured. For these, I would make a point of using Malayalam myself except when, as sometimes happened on pilgrimage, it had the consequence of encouraging dozens of people to talk to me all at once and I found that a retreat to English was the only means to stem the flow.

"I have walked to Manjinikara every year for 41 years. At the beginning we gathered a small group of pilgrims to leave from the chapel here. By the ninth year, I was the principal organizer encouraging people to go, arranging some coffee and snacks at the start, and carrying the flag as we arrived at Arakunnam. To begin with we used to go via Maneed (this was the original starting point for the pilgrimage) but now we go to Arakunnam and thence Piravom without passing through Maneed. The first time I was sixteen years-old. We had heard that miracles were being done for devotees who had been to Manjinikara, which made us interested in it.

Twenty six years ago my wife was pregnant for the first time. I set off to walk to Manjinikara, as usual, although it was close to the time for the delivery. Near to Changanacherry, someone came up to me and said you must hurry back - there seems to be some problem. Some doctors arranged for me to return by car. When I heard this I was worried, and so I made a private prayer to Manjinikara Bawa. I promised that if everything was OK, I would arrange for the child to be baptized at Manjinikara, and, if male, to be given the Bawa's name. I came back and found that my wife and new-born son were fine. As promised, my son was named Elias.

I always remember this - and I go every year. During the first times that I went to Manjinikara I had no particular idea of what blessings might result from it, but I did have a sense of becoming more financially settled, and then I had my family. I have heard of many blessings received by others, including Hindus. I know one Nayar man who recovered from asthma difficulties. However, although we hear about these things, we don't make a point of witnessing about them, as would Catholics or Pentecostalists."

Thomas suggested to me that the Manjinikara pilgrimage has perhaps become too crowded now - it is a challenge to the pilgrim leaders to keep control. He remembers a few incidents from the 1970s when there was trouble between Jacobite and Catholicos-party supporters. But now things proceed without problems. In fact conditions have generally improved, in his opinion, especially in the final night's walking when many more locals offer black coffee and refreshments to the pilgrims. After the first Qurbana at Manjinikara Thomas now usually returns in a bus, which is specially organized and makes brief stops at other important pilgrim centres, notably Parumala and Manarcad, on the way back.

Thomas is in his late fifties. He cultivates pepper, coconut and arecanuts, in a plot of land around a modest but pleasant house, with the help of his son Elias. His situation, and opinions, are typical for many of those in the Jacobite heartland around Ernakulam. He emphasizes that the walking pilgrimage is the genuine event; going by bus is not a proper pilgrimage. Only by walking does one learn what the pilgrimage is really about. Usually, one other member of his family will accompany him, he has six children in all. His account of Manjinikara Bawa's granting safe delivery for his wife and son is quite typical. In his case, it is particularly interesting that he emphasizes a sense of urgency and anxiety concerning the delivery which caused him to issue a heartfelt prayer, with a pledge, during one of the pilgrimages. It was a powerful pilgrimage-related experience, which he has remembered ever since.

An account with some similarity was presented to me by Valsa. We had first encountered one another at the house of one of her relatives at Neelimangalam, north of Kottayam during the Manjinikara pilgrimage. This is where I and some of my fellow pilgrims rested after the first night's walking. I myself remembered rather little of this because I was totally exhausted and fell asleep almost immediately. We resumed our acquaintance later, however. She and her husband have been walking from her husband's home, near to Arakunnam, for some fifteen years. They always stop at the house at Neelimangalam for rest and to see their relatives. In addition, Valsa's husband organizes a meal for pilgrims of their immediate neighbourhood before they depart on the first day from a nearby chapel.

Valsa and her husband had no children for the first five years of marriage. Therefore, they prayed to Manjinikara Bawa, and made a walking pilgrimage to Bawa's tomb to request a baby. At the time of the next pilgrimage Valsa was pregnant, and consequently unable to make the pilgrimage. The next year they went on pilgrimage with the new baby and, in gratitude, vowed to the Bawa that they would go every year subsequently. They always make an offering for mass to be said when they arrive. Valsa was emphatic that even when the baby was small she (Valsa) should walk all the way, except for feeding, although sometimes the baby rested in the pilot car, with an aunt or another relative. Valsa is a housewife living with her husband, her sister-in-law and mother-in-law. Her husband is a bank clerk in nearby Mulanthuruthy. It is notable that for her family the pilgrimage renews kinship ties, as well as commemorating the expansion of their family with the birth of children.

It is interesting to consider the thoughts and opinions of people who have become extremely active in the organization of the pilgrimage. One such is Thankachan, a Constable for the Excise police. For twenty years he has done the walking pilgrimage to Manjinikara. For the last eleven years he has been active on the organizing committee for both Manjinikara and Kothamangalam pilgrimages. These committees organise the pilgrimage practicalities for the dioceses within Ernakulam District and also districts to the north. They aim to encourage participation, either as pilgrims or assisting volunteers. The Patron is a bishop, but the active President in each case is a priest with notable enthusiasm for pilgrimage. Such matters as prayer stops, refreshment breaks, welcoming receptions and pilot vehicles are organised by these committees.

Thankachan begins his walking each year from Maneed which was previously just a small chapel but is significant as the original starting point for the first Manjinikara pilgrimage. Thankachan emphasised that the initial pilgrims to Manjinikara must



have been inspired by the Hindus' walk to Sabarimala. From the beginning miracles were reported, and this would have ensured that the popularity of the pilgrimage grew. He said emphatically "I am the best example of the blessings that can be granted". He meant that he has a good government job, as well as a house, family, and good financial situation. In addition, however, his own grandmother is regarded as the first woman to have made the pilgrimage, in the 1930s. His father also went regularly. There is therefore a proud family tradition of being committed pilgrims, which Thankachan is clearly glad to maintain.

Recently, a problem arose with regard to Thankachan's wife's employment. She was getting tired by having to travel too much and hoped for a transfer. Thankachan told her "remember Bawa everyday". She pledged that she would walk to Manjinikara if she got a nearby position. It required her to take some new tests, but eventually she was successful in getting a new job. She fulfilled her pledge to walk to Manjinikara.

Thankachan is enthusiastic about the Kothamangalam pilgrimage as well as that to Manjinikara and is a committee organiser for both. The motivation to arrange careful organisation of the Kothamangalam pilgrimage derives from the time of greatest trouble between Jacobite and Catholicos-group parties. There was fear of clashes in Kottayam District. This is no longer the case, but Thankachan is certain that it is good for the northern side to have its own extremely popular pilgrimage as well. Because it takes one day only, he says it is more convenient for some people than the longer Manjinikara event.

We can consider another participant who is highly motivated and performs a crucial organising role. Rajan is a doctor who resides near to my own place of residence in Ernakulam Town. For the last twenty-six years he has supervised first aid provision for the Manjinikara pilgrimage. Although this is a very specific role, in which he is doing relatively little walking himself, there is no question that he regards it as a pilgrimage offering on his part. He feels that commitment, reliability and dedication to the task are essential. He likes to reassure people who need assistance that "we are always here" in case further help is needed. He says that he often hears about health problems being alleviated by performing the pilgrimage, but he keeps no record of these accounts.

What determines everything, he says, is seriousness about the spiritual side of the event, including ten days of preparation, eating only vegetarian food. He feels that for some the event is becoming "just a picnic". It is as a result of his attention to these preparations and spiritual matters that he has been able to maintain his strength

in caring for the pilgrims despite their growing numbers, and despite the fact that he often goes without sleep. The doctors (there are now three) are careful to say their prayers regularly, even whilst on duty. "We feel we are being helped to get through, all the time". Rajan represents the medical team on the principal organising committee.

He said "now the number of pilgrims is much increased. It is, perhaps, not so good now. Also the world has changed, so that the spiritual side is less emphasised, and the occasion is difficult to control. It was very spiritual with people always chanting prayers. Some are less bothered now and are just anxious to arrive. But I say it is a penance for our sins - otherwise you could just go by bus. It is a penance like when Christ carried the cross - this is how it should be. I pray when I am on duty, and you should pray as you walk, with a right attitude and without being bothered about worldly things. In this way I get a strong spiritual experience and this helps me to go on, and this is what makes people go repeatedly. This pushes you to go out and join in, you just cannot stay at home. And as a result of this you get great mental peace. What is needed generally is more emphasis on prayerful life ... what you have often is disobedience; but the disobedient people must come back (he is referring to Catholicos-party Orthodox). ....Manjinikara is an expression of loyalty".

In the above account, Rajan does not relate a specific incident within pilgrimage which has notable significance as Thomas did, but he emphasises that the whole event provides him with a special strength to perform his task (of monitoring the first aid) and this gives him a spiritual strength or mental peace to carry over to other times. The fact that the pilgrimage is a penance and an expression of loyalty/obedience (in contrast to the disobedience of others) is strongly emphasised. It makes a statement within the context of the church dispute.

Let us look at Avirachan's story. I met him for the first time during the second night of walking to Manjinikara, and encountered him subsequently both at home and on pilgrimage. He lives in Kuzhiyara, a small village to the east of Ernakulam Town. He is a retired "coolie", labourer, and is proud of the fact that he is known to be a regular pilgrim to Manjinikara, walking there every year.

"I have been to Manjinikara thirty-seven times now. I always go, even when it meant rushing off the day after my son's marriage. We walk from here to Maneed, then off to Piravom. In 1993 I was given a certificate by Mar Philoxenos in recognition of my efforts for the pilgrimage". Mar Philoxenos is President of the Northern Region committee for the pilgrimage. Avirachan showed me the Northern Region flag

which he carries. "Around the time of my first pilgrimage I was going to buy medicine for my wife on my bicycle. I had an accident and suffered a fracture in my arm. I got ayurvedic treatment locally, but the pain did not go. I therefore offered to go to forty-one houses to collect offering money and take it, by walking, to Manjinikara. I did this and the pain went. I became almost unconscious on reaching the tomb, and I felt Bawa say to me 'you should come every year, and I will always be with you'. Therefore, I have gone every year.

"The other blessing in my life is my family. I have four daughters and two sons, all are married and well settled. I am always the leader of our local party. I stay near my flag in the churches which we stop at, and I tell people 'any problems, you can see me. I will be by the flag in the Church'. At Manjinikara I attend the second mass, then, after this, I have been given a lift back home in a decorated chariot for the last few years. I have done the Kothamangalam and Malayattur pilgrimages but personally I am less interested in them. I am respected because I help to maintain good behaviour on the pilgrimage, including good crowd management. If anyone is walking who does not seem to know the prayers I say 'you can sing along with me'. I think people like the fact that I go every year."

A number of the features of the above accounts recurred frequently in other conversations that I had with Jacobite Christians. The value of obedience and loyalty was often emphasised, as was the pilgrimage as offering and penance. When pilgrims discussed their hopes for specific blessings, childbirth was often mentioned as it was by Thomas and Valsa. Matters concerning jobs, especially transfers - as for Thankachan's wife - and unemployment, a major problem in contemporary Kerala, were often mentioned. Other topics mentioned were marriage - finding a suitable spouse for oneself or one's female relatives (the issue of dowry is a major concern for many in Kerala) - and the building of a house, which is a major financial undertaking, and requires much time and energy. There were stories of healings of ailments, skin diseases, joint pains and other, sometimes rather unspecific, conditions.

Stories often related to discomforts, aches and pains experienced during pilgrimage. Mathew, for example, said to me that every year he gets some kind of pain, but it goes and he is able to carry on "because I am supported by the Bawa". These stories were notably close to my own experiences during the Manjinikara pilgrimage. Such ailments contracted during pilgrimage highlight its potential character as ordeal. However the experience of pilgrimage as a whole, entering a period of hardship and suffering which develops and is overcome with the help of prayers to the saint or

deity, contains within it the potential for strengthening the subjective relationship with the saint or deity. Both Rajan and Thomas emphasised their sense of dependence on Manjinikara Bawa in difficult circumstances arising during the pilgrimage (the arduous work, the baby's delivery). They have successfully coped with these and feel that they reached a satisfactory conclusion with the assistance of the saint.

The theme of the support provided to the pilgrim by the saint, possibly in the form of a rather direct intervention or revelation during the pilgrimage, is a fascinating and significant aspect of the subjective side of the pilgrimage process. It is events such as these - and the stories which are recounted about them - which reinforce the enthusiasm and commitment to pilgrimage of individual participants. They ensure that the pilgrimage acts as an occasion for strengthening the participant's faith, and their sense of a spiritual relationship with the saint. We shall see some striking examples from a Hindu context shortly.

In contrast to the above accounts, I encountered relatively few vivid narratives of an experiential type for the Malayattur pilgrimage even though it is an enormously popular and influential event. It is probably the most famous of the Christian sites in Kerala. I attribute this to two things - in the first case, Jacobite Christians, whom I know best, were keen visitors to Malayattur but seemed to regard it as a site of interest, a matter of curiosity, rather than a place for strong devotion. It is, after all, a Catholic site; it is not associated with the Jacobite community and its particular interests, as are the Jacobites own popular pilgrim centres.

My fellow pilgrims to Malayattur from Ernakulam were, however, Catholics. They explained that for them the pilgrimage was especially valuable as something for house-groups to do. These are domestically organised prayer groups from within a parish. They did not place much emphasis on individual commitment, beyond a general sense of the pilgrimage as meritorious and pleasing to the saint. Perhaps there has been some dilution of the character of the pilgrimage. For pilgrims travelling in a bus from Ernakulam, it is not especially long or arduous. The site is nearby. Many of the other pilgrims pass through Cochin to reach it. Does "familiarity breed contempt" in this context? Despite this, many of the pilgrims clearly do treat it as a significant exercise, stopping for prayer by the Stations of the Cross, as well as undergoing confession before communion at the top. The devotion at the sites of the golden cross and especially at the footprint are undertaken with enthusiasm as well.

I would suggest that the visit to Malayattur is as much a learning experience as it is a powerful emotional one. And in a rather specific sense, because it helps to recall events in the legendary biography of a historically distant saint (all the other saints whose pilgrimages we have considered are much more recent). Only a small proportion of pilgrims fully elaborate the possible symbolic aspects of the journey, but nonetheless St. Thomas is a figure who features vividly in the religious imagination of Kerala's Christians. He is frequently recalled as the apostle to India. He is widely portrayed kneeling before the figure of the risen Jesus, with his hand touching the wound in Christ's side, and declaring "My Lord and My God". Although there is no tomb at Malayattur, the footprint and the golden cross can be thought to bring the devotee close to miraculous traces of the presence of the saint. The fact that St. Thomas felt Jesus' wound and also, according to tradition, encountered St. Mary in a vision at Malayattur, would appear to suggest his closeness to Jesus and St. Mary, putting him in an ideal position to intercede on behalf of devotees. The pilgrimage's main day is Low Sunday, the Sunday after Easter, which is when, it is said, he felt the wound in Jesus' side. Joji, the friend with whom I made my second pilgrimage to Malayattur, is an example of someone who finds the pilgrimage interesting, and worthwhile as an act of respect, but does not emphasise the pursuit of blessings in his conception.

In this context, the sense of the pilgrimage strengthening one's imagination and thence one's devotion for the saint could be its primary subjective quality regardless of whether or not specific blessings are sought. The Malayattur pilgrimage can feed the religious imagination. After you have done the pilgrimage, you can more readily visualise the saint withdrawing to the mountain top for prayer and meditation.

The Way of the Cross devotions are popular for many pilgrims, and a re-enactment of the suffering and passion of Christ is appropriate for the Easter period, although it is not especially tied to the cult of St. Thomas. It is notable that one of my fellow pilgrims said to me on the bus back to Ernakulam "now you should go to Pottha" suggesting that I ought to experience the worship of the charismatic healing and retreat centre in addition to the pilgrimage I had just performed. I would conjecture that the charismatic healing cults, of which Pottha (located not far to the north in Trichur District) is by far the most well-known, have come to dominate the category of miraculous healing in the popular religious imagination of Catholics, and some others, in contemporary Kerala. Such places have developed cults based upon the healing powers of contemporary priests. In this way, they resemble the pilgrim

centres in Stirrat's study (1992) of Sri Lanka but not the more "traditional" (although increasingly "modernised" in terms of facilities) sites such as Malayattur.

Whilst stories of miraculous healings provide a general background discourse, a rhetoric of proof of the site's holiness which boosts its prestige, such accounts should not necessarily be taken as a description, in any way, of the average pilgrim's experience. For many individuals a general sense of subjectively strengthening their relationship with the saint through exertion and the exercise of religious imagination is sufficient justification. This is what is usually encountered at Malayattur. This, in itself, is likely to occur against a general background of curiosity, and general excitement and encouragement from other members of the group making the visit. This creates a sense of participating in a massive display of faith and devotion - it is very impressive - even though it may be being "modernised" and it is not strongly oriented towards the preoccupations and interests of any one community, as are the pilgrimages of the Jacobites.

## Hindu Pilgrims

If we turn now to some of the accounts of pilgrimage experiences given to me by Hindus journeying to Sabarimala or Sivagiri, we can see that some themes emerge which compare interestingly with those from the Christians' stories.

Prabhakaran is a member of the Izhava caste, living near to my residence in Ernakulam Town. He has been visiting Sabarimala for many years. He usually travels with a party of friends, and often with one or both of his sons. Whenever possible, he and his companions walk the longer, more traditional route from Erumeli. This is the path which Ayyappan himself took. In November 1995, he accompanied me and a large party of other pilgrims leaving from our local temple. It was the second pilgrimage that I made to Sabarimala. However, this journey was made by bus up to the Pampa, that is to say taking only the shorter and easier route on foot, because one of Prabhakaran's friends was unable to make the longer journey having suffered a stroke earlier in the year. Prabhakaran emphasised to me that the longer route is that of Ayyappan himself. He says that taking the shorter route is really too simple - it is less powerful as an experience. The shorter route misses out important parts of the traditional route, in particular the forest area. This is said to contain wild animals and, according to tradition, there is the possibility of (unworthy) pilgrims being attacked. In practice being bitten by leeches is the most likely event. He is always careful to perform the *vratam* strictly in preparation. The pilgrims have a sense that this was the wilderness which Ayyappan ventured through, even though it is often crowded now.

After the forest area there is Karimala. This is a mountain which is ascended and then descended shortly before the pilgrims reach the Pampa river. The steepness of the slopes which the pilgrims must descend is often commented on. The stones are sharp and people are afraid of falling, especially since they are tired by this stage. Prabhakaran reported that he often has a physical sense of being supported on this slope and being prevented from falling. It happens in a way which suggests to him that Ayyappan himself intervenes and holds him up to stop him tumbling. This is probably the most demanding stage of the journey, but, as Prabhakaran emphasized, the pilgrim gains a sense of direct encounter with the Lord, and he helps them in their difficulty.

The trail earlier, in the forest, is also associated with possible direct encounter with Ayyappan, according to Prabhakaran. On one occasion his party were lost and were unable to determine which way to go. But then there was a shout, a voice apparently

coming from one side, above them, perhaps from behind a tree. They could not tell where it came from. They could not easily move their heads because of the *irumudi*. The voice told them "this way", and so they went in that direction. Later as they passed through that place they found tiger's droppings. They interpreted this as a sign of the presence of Ayyappan - his vehicle is a tiger. Of course it was an ambiguous situation - it felt like a revelation of Ayyappan, guiding them on their path, helping them by showing his presence. This account, as Prabhakaran acknowledges, has an intriguingly enigmatic character - a sense of the possible presence of Ayyappan. This is important, for Ayyappan might be reluctant to reveal himself fully until one reaches the temple. It is at the end of the pilgrimage that one meets Ayyappan directly by taking darshan at the holy shrine.

Ayyappan is also considered to reveal himself to assembled pilgrims at Markara Vilakku. This is the culmination of the pilgrimage season. A light blazes from the mountain top beyond the temple area, and a star shines over the top of the mountain. This mysterious, physical self-revelation by Ayyappan seems quite consistent with the possibility that he might choose to present himself in a close, physical manner during the journey. Of course, for the believer he can be held to be spiritually present at all times. Prabhakaran emphasised that he has seen the Markara Vilakku a number of times.

Sukumaran is another keen Sabarimala pilgrim from my neighbourhood, and a leading member of the local temple committee. He related a similar story to me. Whilst walking along the forest trail on pilgrimage some years ago his party also became lost. But a young pilgrim came up to them just at that moment and clearly pointed out the way to them. Immediately he was gone. The rapid appearance and disappearance of the pilgrim led them to think that it must have been Ayyappan himself. It is said that the Lord accompanies the pilgrims as one amongst them, dressed as a *swami*, a pilgrim journeying to the shrine. One cannot know for sure that the individual is in fact Ayyappan. This realisation comes, if at all, only later; it is a retrospective interpretation.

It is interesting that the theme of Sukumaran's story, the unrecognized presence of the Lord as an ordinary individual, is recurrent in stories concerning the Sabarimala pilgrimage. In fact, such stories are frequent in Hinduism. For example, Krishna revealed himself as an unidentified individual during a festival at Aranmula, a temple situated further down the Pampa River. In any situation one might encounter God, the stories say, including - perhaps especially - in the form of the most humble individual, in the most unlikely circumstances. It is notable that such stories are



frequent in the Christian tradition as well. In this case they have a Biblical basis. There is the account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus walking with a stranger (the Greek word could be "pilgrim") who is only understood to be the risen Christ on his departure (Luke 24:13-31).

An experience related to me by my friend Prasad is extremely interesting to consider at this point. Prasad is a young, unmarried man, of Nayar caste, working as a domestic servant. He is a keen devotee of Krishna, to whom he prays at his local temple. He has journeyed several times to Sabarimala. He decided to join some friends in walking the longer, traditional route from Erumeli. This was a few months before I met him. It was a powerful experience for him, and he states that he would prefer to do the long walk on all subsequent pilgrimages.

Prasad had been careful to prepare appropriately by observing the *vratam*, the period of abstinence. The *mala*, ceremonial chain, was put on his neck by the local temple priest. He went regularly to temple thereafter, bathed daily, took vegetarian diet and practised sexual abstinence. The pilgrimage party travelled to Erumeli by bus, from where the pilgrims walked over the forest and mountain trail to Sabarimala. It was arduous, but satisfying at the end. Three days walking were required in all, with overnight stops and cooking of rice and meals on the way. After one day's walking, there was a point when they passed by some bathers performing ablutions. A young girl was bathing there. Prasad, as he put it to me, looked at her "with lustful thoughts". Almost immediately he felt faint, he lost his footing as though someone had pushed him, and he fell to the ground. An experienced *guruswami* who was nearby came over and said a prayer, blessing him with hand on forehead and some water. He was revived by this and felt better. Prasad believes that he was physically pushed by Ayyappan, because he had strayed from the path of mental/spiritual purity which the pilgrim should be following. Ayyappan asserted his presence and pushed him back in the correct direction, by causing him to lose consciousness, temporarily, in this way. Perhaps he was just weak from tiredness, someone said. He agreed that he had experienced difficulties with the physical exertion, and with maintaining the vegetarian diet, but in his view the event was a divine intervention. It was an experience of immense importance to Prasad. He is certainly a devout Hindu, but in no way given to relating miraculous or fanciful stories. I asked what else was memorable about this pilgrimage. He replied "darshan of the Lord, of course", almost as though this was a silly question. This makes the point that the pilgrimage is both a journey to the Lord, so that the encounter at the shrine is clearly remembered, but it is also for and with the Lord.

Prasad has journeyed to Sabarimala a number of times. As his experience of the place has grown he has come to feel that it is appropriate and beneficial to move towards undertaking the longer and more arduous walk; the easier version is insufficiently challenging now, and offers fewer spiritual fruits. This is a development which I have encountered with other pilgrims as well. They gain a deepened commitment and "seriousness" and wish, increasingly, to experience the fullest form of the process, as the years pass. This development of commitment is possible for those pilgrimages which are undertaken by people regularly, in the case of Sabarimala this is often every year, at least every few years. The same holds for the Jacobite pilgrimages as well. The commitment to the pilgrimage becomes a lifelong concern, although, of course, for ageing pilgrims the more arduous journey can become too difficult. Prabhakaran and his friends reluctantly opted for the shorter route from the Pampa on the occasion when I accompanied them, despite their preference for the fuller, traditional journey.

Vishnu is a regular pilgrim, whose personal "pilgrimage biography" illustrates the point that there is often a steady development of knowledge, commitment and "traditionalism" over the years in an individual's approach to the journeying to Sabarimala. Vishnu is in his mid-twenties. Already he almost qualifies to be a *guruswami*. He has been some fifteen times, almost every year since he was a young boy. When he was a child, he was always accompanied by an adult male from amongst his relatives. They would perform the *irumudi* filling beside their house in a temporary *pandal*. For his grandfather (who was not going), this was emotionally overwhelming. He was afraid because of the stories of danger from wild animals en route, and was overwhelmed by the death related symbolism. The departure ceremony resembles a funeral rite in a few ways as we have noted in the previous chapter. It is a complete break, becoming a new self which is dead to the old. I have observed striking emotions of sadness and anxiety amongst some departing pilgrims. In fact, as a young child Vishnu was always guided by an adult, and took the easier route, which does not seem to present many dangers.

On reaching adulthood, Vishnu became more active in encouraging others to take the pilgrimage. He arranged for parties to depart from his neighbourhood. He was a member of the group the first time I made the pilgrimage. He explained to me that he intended to make a special offering that year, 1994. We used the shorter route from the Pampa, not least because I was a *kanniswami*, "first-timer". On arrival at the Sannidhanam (main shrine), after taking the morning darshan, Vishnu proceeded to make his offering. He prostrated himself outside the front of the main shrine face

down with arms outstretched forward and then rolled sideways, turning round continuously and passing around the outside of the shrine, back to the original point. It was necessary for the rest of us, with the help of a policeman, to keep other people from obstructing or treading on him. When it was necessary to roll at an angle to pass round a corner of the shrine, some gentle shifting of his legs had the desired effect of altering the direction. The potential discomfort of this offering is increased by the tiled surface around the shrine becoming extremely hot. This is a very physical expression of devotion through prostration and endurance of discomfort and exertion. Relatively few pilgrims perform this offering. By contrast, the offering of a ghee-filled coconut is standard, but this has become rather routinised with the coconut broken and the ghee emptied into a large trough over to one side. In view of this, it is not surprising that some pilgrims prefer to make a gesture which is felt to be more personal, and more demanding, when they are at the shrine.

Vishnu's offering related to the fact that his wife had recently been confirmed to be pregnant. He and his wife had come to sense some pressure to have a baby. Many couples are said to reproduce quickly after marriage. Whilst it is certainly the case that many do not, this is experienced as an uncomfortable state; it becomes a matter for comment and gossip. In this context the offering at the shrine both gave thanks and sealed a vow to repeat the act on subsequent visits should all go well. As a committed Ayyappan devotee, no doubt Vishnu values the opportunity to pay his respects to the deity in addition to any significance it has in relation to his personal concerns. During the middle part of the following year the baby was born without problems. It is a son, and was named after the grandfather who had been so moved by Vishnu's pilgrimage departures in earlier years.

For the following season, Vishnu was emphatic that he would like to make the longer pilgrimage, walking from Erumeli. His commitment to, and knowledge of, the pilgrimage had led him to consider that this would be an appropriate and valuable progression. Unfortunately this longer journey had to be arranged for the end of my second season (this is partly because of the leeches) and I had had to return to Scotland by the middle of the season. However, Vishnu wrote to me and described the pilgrimage. He was very glad to have performed it, but felt that even on the more difficult route the crowds were becoming unmanageable. Millions of pilgrims gather to view Ayyappan's light (Markara Vilakku) at the end of the season. Such overwhelming crowds make movement near the temple uncomfortable, if not impossible. It is potentially dangerous. Dozens were hurt when there was a stampede that year.

Once again we notice that the pilgrimage is associated with a personal blessing - here childbirth, which is probably the most common mentioned. The fact that the birth of a child is often connected to a pilgrimage is not surprising given, firstly, that it is, of course, an extremely common event. But it is also potentially fraught with anxiety, the uncertainty of a transitional or liminal state. These anxieties are, on the one hand, of an obvious practical kind, concerning management of the pregnancy and birth, health, diet, money, etc., but also, on the other, of a wider social character. The child must be accepted, cared for and incorporated. This is done at naming ceremonies (baptism for Christians) when the child may be given the name of the saint or deity of the pilgrimage with which the birth is associated. The child may also be blessed by being taken on pilgrimage. This further reinforces the value of pilgrimage by bestowing social recognition and sacred approval upon the arrival of the new individual.

The important point to emphasise is that whilst childbirth is obviously "natural", in a sense, for pilgrims such as Vishnu the whole event is nonetheless a blessing from Ayyappan. It has been suggested that the Sabarimala cult is intricately associated with matters of fertility. The period of abstinence during the season (Nov-Jan) if strictly observed would ensure that no babies are born during a lean season (Aug-Oct) towards the end of the rainy period (personal communication, Prof. G. Mathew, Kerala University August 1994). This is an intriguing suggestion, although not really a phenomenological point. However, it could be argued that a period of abstinence might boost fertility in the following period, as a result of psychological or physiological influences. At any rate, it seems likely that the confidence that the deity is concerned for those involved is very likely to help dispel anxieties which could surround conception, pregnancy and childbirth for both practical and socio-cultural reasons. One might note here that only the husband can make the pilgrimage to Sabarimala, the wife is excluded by virtue of being a female of reproductive age. The couple could go together to a Christian site, or perhaps to Kodungallur or some other Devi temple. Such a visit by the couple together might make a more obviously public statement about their situation. Travelling at the same time can be difficult for practical reasons, however, due to household commitments and such like.

Perhaps, there is some significance in the fact that the temporary "sacrifice" of the couple's fertility - through practice of sexual abstinence - which obviously requires a degree of separation of husband and wife, is offered to a celibate deity. In accepting the devotion behind this temporary sacrifice Ayyappan is thought to be encouraged to bless the fertility ("the worldly desire") of the couple once they resume their state

as normal householders after the pilgrimage period. It is a sort of imitative renunciation. It is certainly a well-known fact that the enormously popular Christian singer from Kerala, Yesudas, was blessed with a son after he had made a pilgrimage to Sabarimala. The temporary sacrifice is believed to work.

I am acquainted with an older woman who regularly undertakes a pilgrimage to Sabarimala for her husband, who had a heart attack some years ago. The pilgrimage both offers thanks for his preservation during the previous year, expresses hopes for the future, and obviously makes a statement of commitment by this woman to both Ayyappan and her husband. The motives for the pilgrimage, the experiences during it and their subsequent interpretation and evaluation are likely to become thoroughly intertwined in such situations.

A number of other themes have been prominent in my discussions with Sabarimala pilgrims in connection with blessings and personal benefits which they say they have derived from their journeys. One of these is success in employment, business or financial affairs. Unemployment, as pointed out, is a major problem in Kerala, with few jobs available to satisfy the many highly educated people. The return of a gift to the deity as thanksgiving for success in employment or business is a ubiquitous feature of pilgrimage, and accounts for the fact that shrines such as Sabarimala raise huge amounts of income for the Temple Board controlling them. The Board's ability to maintain and renovate other temples depends in good part on the revenue raised at Sabarimala. The willingness of devotees to give sizeable donations can be regarded as a sacrifice which conveys the sense that all good things come from God, and one should acknowledge one's dependence, possible unworthiness and willingness to return things in this way. This is similar to the comment made earlier concerning the temporary renunciation of sex and its possible association with subsequent childbirth. Renunciation and sacrifice is, of course, a recurrent theme in religious tradition; one thinks of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, and the self-sacrifice of King Mahabali in traditional Kerala legend when he surrendered himself to Vishnu at the end of the golden era in the mythic past.

Marital harmony and a peaceful family life are also matters for which pilgrims pray. One might suggest that the undertaking of pilgrimage is a statement of a willingness to work at such problems. It might be a means of bringing out tensions which are latent. This could be achieved either if one member of the family makes the pilgrimage, or if more than one do so (perhaps husband and wife). For Sabarimala the latter would not be possible until the wife is over 50, and in fact there is considerable variation in pilgrims' motivation to travel with other family members.

An important issue to consider, which we will look at again later, is alcoholism. This is widespread in Kerala. This is, in part, due to problems of chronic unemployment and underemployment. Of course it can lead to all kinds of familial and financial strains. A pilgrimage such as that to Sabarimala might be an excellent occasion to address such an issue, not only because it comprises an opportunity for expressing or confronting a difficulty, acknowledging that it is there, as noted for other kinds of family tension, but also because the pilgrimage in principle involves a long period of abstinence from alcohol. No liquor should be consumed during the *vratam* (period of preparation) or during the pilgrimage.<sup>14</sup>

The Sivagiri pilgrimage is associated with a shorter period of *vratam* than Sabarimala, generally ten days, but it is, if anything, still more powerfully associated with an anti-alcohol message. Abstaining from intoxicating liquor and avoiding drunkenness was one of Sri Narayana's central teachings. The pilgrimage to Sivagiri is understood by pilgrims to be an opportunity for propagating the message of the Guru, including his views on alcohol.

The significance of the Sivagiri pilgrimage as an opportunity to propagate the Guru's message contrasts, of course, with Sabarimala. Sivagiri is a community pilgrimage resembling those of the Jacobites. Both incorporate veneration of, and an assertion of dependence upon, their respective holy men. In discussion with those who had participated in long Sivagiri pilgrimages, walking for five or more days, I was struck by an emphasis upon how it gave them a sense of peace and dedication to be involved in the propagation of the message in this way. One man who is an example of this had been a committed activist, and councillor, for his local Marxist party. However, he became disillusioned because he felt that the Marxists were upholding the interests of the well-placed. Thereafter he became a passionate purveyor of the message of Sri Narayana Guru, during the pilgrimage and at other times.

Various minor ailments were said to have been ameliorated by the Sivagiri pilgrimage, but the mental peace derived from the undertaking was most emphasized. "One had a sense of being respected by the onlookers and they appreciated what we were doing", one participant explained to me. Through the frequent singing of devotional songs, as well as by prayer and meditation, the pilgrims achieve a constant sense of the spiritual presence of the guru. This is reinforced by the fact that the pilgrimage is, in a number of respects, an imitative enactment of the Guru's own wanderings, when he would walk to spread the message, clad in yellow robe, and

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<sup>14</sup>Ayrookuzhiel (1983:121) noted the possibility of changes in drinking habits, on the basis of some interviews carried out with Sabarimala pilgrims.

rely on hospitality where it was offered. As one pilgrim said, "I never would have thought that I would be able to walk for a week, all through the day, all the way to Sivagiri. I am easily bothered by heat and intense sunlight. But I managed it, because the Guru was helping me". This comment reflects a similar subjective sense to that of Rajan for Manjinikara. He feels that it is his duty to perform a service for the holy man in this way, it is an offering. Although he wonders where the strength for it comes from, he feels a sense of being supported and maintained on the way.

Many pilgrims, both Christian and Hindu, have shared thoughts and experiences with me concerning pilgrimage. In the above, I have attempted to select accounts which are both reasonably representative as well as interesting. I have tried to convey a sense of the personal aspects of pilgrimage which make it important for participants including their various motives and I have tried to understand some of the subjective quality of pilgrims' experiences and insights. I have provided some context where this has seemed appropriate, but I have not presented extensive biographical details. To provide a full and fair biographical portrait of anybody in order to gain a really accurate sense of the development of their attitudes and religious practices would require years of acquaintance, not the one and a half years of the present fieldwork project. Nonetheless, I think one can grasp some of the typical qualities of the personal experiences and motivations by participating in the multiple opportunities for conversation during fieldwork. These can often be related to common individual and social concerns such as childbirth, healing, unemployment etc.. This approach does not exhaustively capture every detail of an individual's background and life-situation, but general patterns can emerge, and we can now attempt to understand some of these more fully.

### Summary of Chapter seven

Chapter seven explores phenomenological approaches to pilgrimage. E.V. Daniel's account of the Sabarimala pilgrimage in "Fluid Signs" (1984) and, in particular, his use of C.S. Peirce's phenomenological categories is discussed. It is argued that his characterisation of the pilgrimage as a steady progression towards unmediated union with the Lord ignores the possibility of sudden encounters with Ayyappan during the journey which are described by some pilgrims and overemphasises philosophical and epistemological concerns. Daniel's account is strongly autophenomenological - it is coloured by his own reactions to smells, dirty bathing pools and other discomforts. An autophenomenological perspective is valuable if it is supplemented with sufficient observations and comments from other pilgrims to permit an insight into the general characteristics of pilgrimage experience as undergone by most participants. This can be followed by heterophenomenological enquiry in which pilgrims are encouraged to report at length about their own experiences, memories and motives. Such accounts take the form of retrospective narratives, which means that they must be treated carefully as interpretations which themselves require interpretation.

Accounts of personal experiences and pilgrimage memories provided by both Christians and Hindus are detailed. Certain issues, including childbirth, employment problems, pains and ailments are seen to be recurrent. Pilgrims often report a sense of being helped to overcome difficulties experienced during the pilgrimage itself. Problems of pain and fatigue can be regarded as features of penance and sacrifice, as can temporary abstention from meat, liquor and sex. Some pilgrimages assist in the development of the participant's imagination, particularly concerning historically distant figures. Many pilgrims express a sense of satisfaction at taking part in an event of wide social significance, especially when spreading the message conveyed by community pilgrimages.



## CHAPTER 8

### **MEANING AND TRANSFORMATION IN THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF PILGRIMAGE**

### Three Propositions of Phenomenology.

It is now possible to explore some of the themes which emerge from the ethnographic material of the previous section attempting to elucidate the meanings and implications of them. Some of the issues brought up by extended conversations with pilgrims (the "heterophenomenological" data) deserve further theoretical elucidation. This can be done whilst at the same time keeping in mind earlier material concerning my own thoughts and experiences during pilgrimage (the "autophenomenological" data). In order to orient the discussion, I shall present a brief and abstracted summary of the particular phenomenological perspective which has most influenced my thinking. In the following subsections, the principles adumbrated here will be used to guide the exploration of specific themes in the experience of pilgrimage.

As we have seen, the phenomenological approach aims to elucidate salient features of experience in diverse behavioural and performative contexts, in this case the undertaking of pilgrimage. Its methodology and motivation can be said to rest on a number of basic premises, which I will state here as three key propositions. This is my own formulation, but relates quite closely, I think, to the standpoint outlined by Merleau-Ponty in "Phenomenology of Perception" (Merleau-Ponty 1962), which is widely regarded as one of the principal texts of the phenomenological school. It will be impossible to avoid a certain vagueness in the statement of the propositions, but their significance should become clearer as we proceed.

Proposition One: Meanings of many different kinds can be said to be immanent in all human situations and activities - in basic performances including perception, action and interaction. These meanings should not, in the first instance, be conceptualised as identical to the meanings of words or sentences. It might be tempting to say that meanings which are immanent in situations are "significances" or "proto-meanings", distinct from the meanings of words. But this is unnecessary and question-begging; it is important to recognize that the expression on someone's face, for instance, possesses meaning as much as a comment which they utter. This is a key example, as we shall see. People directly and spontaneously perceive meanings in their environment, as well as in the behaviour of others, and additionally in their own behaviour, sensations and other experiences. Merleau-Ponty said "because we are in the world, we are condemned to meaning" (Merleau-Ponty 1962:XIX - emphasis in original) an issue discussed also by the anthropologist Michael Jackson (1996:32).

Proposition Two: People interact with the world, with other people and with themselves as embodied subjects, possessing a history. In general, they encounter the world as whole bodily selves, with the various component parts and "faculties" operating in a thoroughly integrated way. There is, consequently, considerable artificiality in treating perception, cognition, emotion or social encounter as neatly compartmentalized categories, though sometimes this is unavoidable. In all of the multiple facets of the self, a subject will bear the stamp of a particular history as an individual; this reflects the manner in which the environment and other people have impinged upon them, and they, in their turn, have responded.

Proposition Three: A significant proportion of the behaviours and experiences which constitute the complete performances of an embodied subject are not amenable to simple, detached observation. This is often because they are "covert", in one or other of two senses. They may take place in private, away from the possible attentions of other individuals - for example private prayer. Alternatively, they may involve subtle performances - internal monologue and dialogue, processes of remembering, reflecting and imagining or complex emotional changes - for which simple observation is insufficient. These are not matters which are insusceptible to observation in all respects, but nonetheless they cannot be fully accessed or evaluated without engaging with the person concerned. There is no alternative to encouraging the individual to provide first-person reports, self-descriptions and personal reflections. These provide the richest and most authentic source of information concerning the integrated performances of another self. The process of encouraging the sharing of such matters, together with the endeavour to understand it, is at the heart of heterophenomenological enquiry. The phenomenological standpoint takes the view that the possibility of such sharing between two embodied subjects is an integral feature of the human condition. It therefore rejects extreme scepticism about the possibility of knowing about the experiences of another, whilst at the same time recognising the recurrent presence of some doubts and ambiguities<sup>15</sup>. It is clearly the case that our three propositions inter-relate. For example, the personal history referred to in proposition two clearly affects the perceived meanings of proposition one as well as all the subtle and covert performances of proposition three. Whenever we think about the embodied subject with a history (proposition two) and their diverse public and private activities (proposition three) we must remember that they comprise, at all times, a self immersed in meaning (proposition one) - and so forth.

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<sup>15</sup> See Part 2 Chapter 4 of "Phenomenology of Perception" (Merleau-Ponty 1962) on the problem of knowing others - this is an issue to which we will return later

At the moment these are highly abstract principles concerning human "being in the life-world" as a phenomenologist might see it. By exploring the proffered comments, memories and behaviours of pilgrim-informants, supplemented as appropriate by my own experiences, it will be possible to put some flesh on these bones.

It would be useful as a preliminary, however, to elucidate further the significance of our proposition one, since its sense is rather elusive but it is of central importance to our discussion. In his "Phenomenology of Perception", Merleau-Ponty (1962) explores at length, but from unusual angles, the concept of meaning. His discussion is of importance for the anthropologist because he is providing a critique of conceptions of meaning which still have considerable influence in Western culture and social science. This may seem surprising, at first, since it is widely held that the concept of meaning has undergone a radical overhaul in the wake of postmodernism, the consequences of which have been widely felt, at least within Western academia. Gone is the notion of the transcendental signified, we are led to believe. No longer do we accept the notion of a definite, discrete meaning corresponding to all signifiers in the way in which a person corresponds to a particular name. Whilst the rejection of this notion is no doubt important, it does not itself express the insight - critical to the phenomenological approach - that there is something misleading about the assumption that meaning is, at root, a property of signifiers, words or texts. Meaning in the life-world, as the phenomenologist sees it, stretches much more broadly than this - and no simple revision of the notion of "signifier" could accommodate this.

Meaning, for the phenomenologist, is immanent in the situations in which people live and thence comes to inhere to a heightened degree in particular markers, often sanctioned by convention, which are called signifiers. The realisation of this typically eludes us, however, because we have a faulty understanding of perception. It is usual, but inappropriate, according to Merleau-Ponty, to conceive of perception as a simple and passive absorption of images or sensations from the world, upon which our cognition (alternatively our "brains") can get to work to yield the world-as-perceived. But, by contrast, we ought to appreciate that the human being is necessarily engaged with the world. Perception is an active or, better, interactive process which discloses endless significant and meaningful features of the environment to the individual. This process is always ongoing and never complete; it utilizes all the faculties and components of the bodily self. Consequently, perceiving is shaped by an individual's biological humanity, their individuality - both general and specific physical characteristics - as well as their personal history and social

background. But, unfortunately, within predominant Western discourse, we do not begin our enquiries with the recognition of the omnipresence of meanings in the life-world which are constantly being disclosed. Instead we replace this with the colourless and odourless realm of post-Galilean abstraction, and relegate the meaningful to some other domain in accordance with our empiricist, intellectualist or Platonist assumptions.

Two examples should help to make this clearer. It was mentioned that a human face, through bearing an expression, possesses a meaning which is seen as much as the meaning of any utterance may be heard which is spoken by it. It is tempting to say that looking at a human face is an exceptional case, unlike the rest of our day to day perception. But this ignores the important fact that very young infants spend much time fixating upon their mother's face and responding to it, as they begin the process of perceiving and becoming oriented in the world. Moreover, the significance of the human face lies in the fact that our response to it is frequently a prelude to encounter, to dialogue, of a manifestly interactive kind. And, as Merleau-Ponty stresses, this process of response and encounter and endless adjustment to new angles and revealed features (akin to a dialogue) is also characteristic of our ongoing perception in engagement with the world in both mundane and exceptional circumstances. We encounter the "faces" of the things in our world - their "physiognomy", as Merleau-Ponty calls it - somewhat as we encounter the faces of people.

A second example would be helpful. Merleau-Ponty criticizes the notion that the apparent enormity of the moon, when it is perceived low down, close to the horizon, needs to be explained as an "illusion". The view that this is an illusion derives from the fact that we do not notice its enormity when it is overhead, at its zenith. In addition, the idea that it is an illusion is reinforced by the fact that there is no perceived difference in the size of the moon in either position if it is viewed through a telescope. But considered phenomenologically, the enormity of the moon when seen near the horizon is a completely natural and veridical perception. This is because its great size is evident from its proximity to a horizon which is the limiting edge of a surface - a landscape stretching before the subject which has been the setting, for the subject, of a lifetime's experience of moving around and engaging with near and far objects. Phenomenologically speaking, the moon is very large. It is only in the context of scientific observation with a telescope, or the situation of staring upwards at the moon with only sky as backdrop, that the familiar perceptual surrounds - landscape, patterned terrain, horizon - and their established bodily significances, are abolished. There is then no meaningful perceptual-bodily context

for our viewing of the moon and so we remain puzzled by, and probably indifferent to, its size. By contrast, it is the awestruck sighting of the apparently huge moon, low down in the sky, which exemplifies veridical perception in the human life-world. In seeing its size, as well as its brightness, shape, colour, also its mysteriousness and "tranquillity", we are encountering its physiognomy, as Merleau-Ponty expresses it.

William Blake said " 'What' it will be questioned 'when the sun rises do you not see a round disc of fire somewhat like guinea?' 'Oh no, no, I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host crying "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty" ' " (Blake 1810). In his way, Blake was making a sound phenomenological point. Of course, it is stated with the use of rich imagery deriving from his culture. Nonetheless, Blake's words should not be dismissed as mere hyperbole displaying idiosyncrasies of his own cultural conditioning. He is saying something quite accurate about the rising sun as perceived within the lifeworld - that it is striking and impressive and emotionally resonant. This fact is conveyed by Blake in a way which reflects his own personal history - as a poet in a Christian culture - but his comments are based on genuine and meaningful features of a subject's perception of the sun.

In order to press the reader into reconsidering the nature of perception in a subject's engagement with the world, Merleau-Ponty frequently discusses unusual situations. He considers someone who has the sense of an imaginary arm after their actual arm has been amputated. He also considers some altered states of consciousness, such as perception under the influence of mescaline. There are also discussions of specific cases of neuropathology. Alongside these situations, however, Merleau-Ponty is also concerned with very mundane situations. He says "my flat is, for me, not a set of closely associated images. It remains a familiar domain round about me only as long as I still have 'in my hands' or 'in my legs' the main distances and directions involved, and as long as from my body intentional threads run out towards it" (Merleau-Ponty 1962:130).

There is an important point to make at the outset concerning our investigation of peoples' experiences of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is an activity in which thoroughly familiar situations and incidents are juxtaposed with the less usual, the mysterious, even the bizarre. In my experience, informants are especially likely to emphasize the striking and dramatic in recollections of their experiences. This is not surprising given the popularity of pilgrimage narratives which have some kind of miraculous content. In addition, however, pilgrims often comment about what they like or dislike in pilgrimage and what changes they have noticed over the years. By attending to these matters whilst also considering other basic characteristics and

events around which they shape their descriptions, it is possible to gain some sense of the basic quality of the pilgrimage as it is experienced.

As always in a phenomenological discussion it is necessary to be aware of the background to what is noticed, the implications which are not stated, and the innumerable taken-for-granted features which contribute to the overall texture of the experienced event. By keeping in mind both the parts and the whole, foreground and background, supplementing with my own observations where necessary, we can tackle the basic questions with which we are now concerned. What are the diverse meanings which emerge in the process of undertaking pilgrimage? In what ways does the activity engage the whole embodied subject, with their particular personal history? What are the various accompanying performances, the private and covert processes, into which the subject enters, and by which they may be changed, as part of doing the pilgrimage?

We will start off, like Merleau-Ponty, with perception. The meanings of pilgrimage are encountered initially by the subject through processes of perception and sensation. The meanings and experiences derived from them can then be elaborated through active processes of a more or less private character - internal monologue/dialogue, imagination and recollection. At the same time, these can be influenced by interactions with fellow pilgrims, by observing their behaviour, exchanging comments and entering into conversations. We can term these processes perceptual, cognitive and social, respectively. Of course, there is an artificiality in any sharp demarcation here. They all interact in the ongoing life of the subject, as indicated by proposition two. In particular, the term "cognitive" has acquired some regrettable connotations which suggest that it concerns rational and calculating performances which are quite divorced from the bodily or emotional. Nonetheless, it will be helpful to structure the following discussion around the three subdivisions of perceptual, cognitive and social processes, attempting to discern the emergence of diverse meanings within each of them. The salient features of pilgrimage as a perceptual and sensory experience will be considered first. Later, some of the themes can be carried over into the discussions of cognitive and social processes.

## **Meanings within the Perceptions and Sensations of Pilgrimage.**

In the following discussion we shall be especially concerned with drawing out themes from the accounts presented by pilgrim informants themselves, as set out in the earlier section. However, it will also be worth keeping in mind salient features of the perceptual-sensory experience of doing pilgrimage which I described in the autophenomenological section of the previous chapter. This is because of the point noted above; informants tend to highlight the surprising and dramatic, the strikingly pleasant or unpleasant, although this needs to be contextualised within the entire perceptual-sensory flow of the undertaking. Many features of this become part of the "taken-for-granted", especially for experienced pilgrims. They are incorporated into the pilgrim's habitus, to use Bourdieu's term, but nonetheless comprise important aspects of the pilgrimage gestalt. For example, the sight of the long lines of Syrian Christian women, turned out in their entirely white dress, is a characteristic feature of the Jacobite pilgrimages, but would not necessarily be remarked on since it is such a typical, expected feature of the occasion.

### **(i) Immersion in the Perceptual Process.**

A first point that is worth emphasising is that experienced informants frequently stress that walking the full distance, especially for the pilgrimages to Manjnikara and Sabarimala, comprises the real experience, the genuine event. We saw that Thomas and Prasad both made comments of this kind. This assertion is probably made for a number of reasons, but foremost, no doubt, is the fact that during the long walk one undergoes a full and protracted immersion in the perceptual-sensory encounters of the journey. This gives the process an intensity which cannot readily be matched by faster and more convenient travel. The importance of walking draws attention to the fact that pilgrimage is a thoroughly bodily engagement with religious faith - there is self-exertion and an exposure of the whole self to the terrain and other people en route. One could say that pilgrimage is a sort of physically enacted prayer, in contrast to the merely spoken variety, and that this can facilitate a sense of deep presentation of the self to divinity. This profound exposure of the self permits the possibility of an apparent reciprocity in the encounter with divinity, as we shall see later.

Participants (such as Thankachan) who are especially involved with organizing committees, and others who make a point of carrying flags at the head of a party or arranging snacks, such as Avirachan, often convey in their comments a strong sense that the pilgrimage must look right. It should possess a distinctive style and



orderliness, especially for the Jacobites and Sivagiri pilgrims. This expectation arises, of course, because the pilgrimages are regular events, occurring at least annually for the principal destinations. Although some evolution of the character of the events is expected, participants nonetheless assume that matters will proceed along similar lines to previous years. Regular pilgrims acquire a *habitus*, a familiarity with the process by which certain aspects become standard and automatic. They expect a certain quality to the pilgrimage as perceptual and sensory experience.

Against the background of familiarity -typical sights and sounds - experienced pilgrims are keen to emphasize the significant changes which they encounter. For example, many people now comment on the relentless increase in the number of participants. The sight of the long Jacobite lines or the crowds at Sabarimala can be impressive but they are now rather formidable, they say. Such comments also reveal expectations concerning the broad quality of the pilgrimage, what it should be like. Because it is so crowded it is, perhaps, insufficiently peaceful, as Rajan said of the Manjinikara journey. An expectation of tranquillity is especially pronounced for the Sivagiri pilgrimage - it is supposed to look and sound beautiful, many say. This reflects Sri Narayana Guru's emphasis on the aesthetic side of spirituality. We might call this the general quality or "physiognomy" of the entire pilgrimage event, which cannot be captured by reference to a specific object or incident but is something which participants value and feel strongly about. Within this general context there are some particular situations which, pilgrims imply, contribute particularly to the journey as a perceptual-sensory process, and we can explore some of these.

It is interesting that Thomas commented on the fact that the larger number of volunteers and well-wishers has the advantageous consequence that more coffee stops and refreshments are available. In particular this is important, he said, during the first night's walking to Manjinikara. The reason for his remarking on this is probably that the overnight walking is an unusual and demanding experience even for pilgrims who are used to covering long distances and are accustomed to the heat of the day. There are two full nights of walking to Manjinikara; I was certainly not the only one who found this difficult, both because of exhaustion, and also because of the eeriness of sensory deprivation as one stumbles along in total darkness. There were occasional anxious moments of disorientation ("did we go the right way?") before an elevation in the road allowed us to spot a decorated chariot somewhere ahead with other pilgrims around it. The discomfort of this part of the journey, most acute during periods of complete absence of perceptual stimulation, contributes to the sense of ordeal contained within the pilgrimage experience.

The periodic sense of disorientation and anxiety in the night-walking to Manjinikara parallels the experience of walking through the forest to Sabarimala, which can also be confusing, and even threatening. Both Prabhakaran and Sukamaran related incidents which concerned their anxiety on becoming lost in the forest. In this situation they became fully dependent on the Lord himself, they implied, who showed them the way forward. This can obviously be taken as a metaphor for general spiritual bewilderment, followed by reorientation; a deeper meaning for significant experiences can often be discerned in the process of pilgrimage.

Contrasting emotions are induced by the many different settings through which the pilgrim passes. There is the beauty of the journey to Sivagiri as well as the anxiety of disorientation en route to Manjinikara or Sabarimala. Of course, contrasting experiences can result from multiply different situations encountered within a single journey. In large part this is a matter of the phenomenology of landscape<sup>16</sup>. Forests, mountains, rivers and so forth texture the environment which we inhabit and thus motivate our perception and engagement with it, in ways which resemble the role of the horizon when we look at the moon low in the sky.

The "physiognomy" of mountains is perhaps the most obvious feature of the perceived landscape which participates in the pilgrimage experience. At Malayattur, the shape of the hill has a lonely dignity which seems to invite meditation and the effort of ascent. Sabarimala, by contrast, lies in a bowl within a more markedly mountainous terrain, which confers upon it a quality of peaceful remoteness despite new buildings. The mountain tops around can be seen to look down, protectively perhaps, upon the temple area. The experience of being in the landscape must be a principal reason for the insistence that the long, traditional route to Sabarimala is much better, as conveyed by Vishnu and Prasad, for example.

Within the landscape one sees, also, traces of the presence of countless other pilgrims - worn paths, broken trees and bushes and, of course, drinks stalls and litter as one nears the destination. There is usually no encounter with wilderness or mountains during the Jacobite or Sivagiri pilgrimages. Instead, their journeys usually include a substantial stretch along the Main Central Road of the state. Here one passes through innumerable towns and villages, by churches and temples, as though the holiness of the occasion creates a river of devoted participants, flowing down through the state and drawing on many tributaries. Participants see the familiar shops, homes and fields of Central Kerala, but with a difference, for there are regular crowds of

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<sup>16</sup> Phenomenology of place and landscape is discussed by Tilley (1994) and Casey (1997).

onlookers, decorated churches and periodic offerings of snacks or firecrackers. Pilgrims become aware of being seen to be making the journey, and of being supported on their way.

(ii) Attunement of Perceptions.

An experienced pilgrim gains a sense of simply knowing how and where to proceed, rather like Merleau-Ponty's familiarity with his own flat as a space within which he moves around. Avirachan said that he likes to rest right beside the principal churches of the Manjinikara route. In part, this is so that he can be spotted by people in his own party should they need him, but it also has the character of renewing an acquaintanceship with a special place. The appearance of known churches and other sites is often commented on by pilgrims as the journey progresses - almost like spotting an old friend in the distance. Again, we can say that participants become adjusted to a *habitus*, they grow unreflectingly acquainted with a particular pattern of activity. However, this does not mean that they move towards a situation of simple routinization. On the contrary, increased familiarity allows further significances and experiences to unfold. An opera does not lose its meaning because one can anticipate the order of events - if anything more details are revealed. This is so because perceiving and sensing are never simply matters of passive absorption - they are active processes in which the subject becomes "attuned" to innumerable features, but in a way which allows further exploration and progressive "pick-up" of information. The terms "attunement" and "informational pick-up" derive from the work of the noted psychologist of perception J J Gibson (1966, 1979).

The perceptual psychology of Gibson was termed by him an "ecological" standpoint. It was influenced by the work of the Gestaltists, as were the ideas of the phenomenologists, and is quite compatible with the latter approach. Gibson's work has begun to influence anthropology, for example in considering the manner in which attunement to the environment permits the creation of "memories" (Ingold 1992,1993) which exist between people and places, not just in their heads. Gibson's perspective continually undermines unhelpfully dualistic preconceptions which can sharply separate subject and object. He introduced the notion of "affordance", a significant quality of the environment. This is a notion which comes close to Merleau-Ponty's enriched notion of meaning.

Gibson's work is useful for us because we should emphasise the importance of processes of "attuned" perception which contribute to the pilgrimage experience. One obvious example of this is the sound of the pilgrimage songs. Some of these are

a standard feature of the event each year and become familiar to experienced pilgrims. In addition one or two catchy new tunes are introduced each year - everyone soon picks them up. Particular tunes can therefore be associated with particular years and particular incidents whilst others are characteristic of the pilgrimage in general. Avirachan commented that he will walk alongside any participant who seems not to know the songs in order that the inexperienced pilgrim will have someone to listen to and follow. Rajan also stresses the importance for him of enthusiastic singing and chanting of the various melodies. In fact, many pilgrims say that the sound of the songs and participation in the communal singing is the most memorable and enjoyable aspect of the pilgrimage. The characteristic sounds of the pilgrimage may also be intended to engage the attention of onlookers, as well as to express the devotion of participants.

An attunement to the characteristic smells of pilgrimage can be expected in the same way as for sounds. There is the distinctive smell of burning incense, which is a standard feature of Jacobite celebration of the mass, but is especially intense at the large pilgrims' mass at the end of a journey, particularly at Kothamangalam. By contrast, there is the notably unpleasant smell of bus and car fumes as the party travels along a busy road - this was especially powerful on the main road near Alwaye, en route to North Paravur; pilgrims often winced with discomfort. This is interesting because we noted previously the famous case of Proust's association of memories with smells and flavours. Pilgrims are handed water spiced with pepper, which is said to be reviving, and treacly tasting cakes. Such stimuli become a powerful component in a perceptual gestalt, and can feature prominently in its subsequent recollection. Stoller (1989) provides an interesting ethnographic account which details his own gradual attainment of familiarity with the various smells in the lives of the Songhay of Niger. Only as he became "attuned" to these did he appreciate the significance of the subtle perceptual and sensory texturing of the environment he was inhabiting<sup>17</sup>. Evidence for the significance of smell and flavour in human memory has been provided by some studies in experimental psychology (Engen and Ross 1973). However, it should be commented that for many pilgrims the important matter is probably just that they get free refreshments and meals.

One of the most powerful perceptual stimuli encountered during pilgrimage is light. There is both natural and artificial light of striking character. We noted previously the eerie quality of the complete absence of light and sound whilst walking through the night in the silent darkness during the journey to Manjinikara. The Sivagiri

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<sup>17</sup> Stoller (1996) has recently argued similarly for sounds.

pilgrimage is said to occur at an especially agreeable time, late December, because of the climate and quality of the light along the coastal route. Displays of man-made light are often incorporated into pilgrimages. There are coloured-light decorations - ubiquitous at all kinds of celebrations in India. These are used to create giant images of the saints, for example at Parumala and North Paravur. They are, in fact, large-scale versions of the portraits which accompany the pilgrimage parties. Fireworks are popular at the conclusion of the events, especially at Kothamangalam and Mulanthuruthy. These obviously comprise an eyecatching spectacle for both pilgrims and casual onlookers although they have become fairly standard. More uniquely striking, though, must be the Markara Vilakku at Sabarimala, the bright light which shines from the top of a mountain close to the shrine area at the climax of the pilgrimage. It is said to be a revelation of the presence of Ayyappan himself. I have never seen it myself, but those who have, Prabhakaran for example, mention it as one of the most memorable experiences possible for the pilgrim. It is certainly one of the most famous features of any pilgrimage in Kerala.

I was, myself, very struck by the quality of the light around, and emanating from, the image of Ayyappan in the main shrine at Sabarimala. It is a rich and attractive gold colour, suggestive of both purity and divinity. The dramatic appearance of the image within the shrine, even though not very large, demonstrates the fact that worshipping by taking darshan is a powerful experience. It is a way of seeing which permits direct perception of the divine by the pilgrim, and hence is the culmination of the entire experience. It was noted that on asking Prasad what he found most memorable about the pilgrimage to Sabarimala, he said "darshan of the Lord, of course" as though the question was quite superfluous. The importance of this was also noted in the discussion of autophenomenology and the general characteristics of pilgrimage. Here we can attempt to understand more fully why it is important.

For the anthropologist thinking about the process of taking darshan, as for other perceptual experiences which we have considered, it is tempting to assume that there must be a basic biological process involved - "seeing the object" - which is then followed by an "interpretation" of whatever is seen. The latter activity would achieve the imposition of culturally-derived cognitions and other reactions. But this is very misleading, as our earlier propositions one and two were intended to suggest. We can refer here to Wittgenstein's famous discussion of "seeing as", in his consideration of the duck-rabbit picture in Part II of the *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1958). This is a notable attack on such intellectualist presuppositions. Wittgenstein draws attention to the possibility that a process of direct perception, interactively

engaging the subject, can empower the individual to draw out all kinds of aspects of a presenting scene which are obscure and undifferentiated for another observer. Coming to see an "aspect" is a characteristic of perceptual attunement. This can be compared to listening to a piece of music. The "musical" or trained ear can hear - quite directly - much which is lost to someone else. Wittgenstein's interest in this topic was aroused by the Gestalt psychologists, who, as we noted, also influenced J J Gibson and Merleau-Ponty.

These points are worth emphasising because the experience of looking at the image of the deity, taking darshan, may be the culmination of the pilgrimage process, particularly at Sabarimala. The perceiver encounters the image with an individual personal history which has been moulded by the Ayyappan cult and other aspects of Hindu tradition. Drawing upon this through attuned perception, not intellectualisation, they can actively engage with the unique features of the perceptual array which is presented to them at the main shrine. This process is all the more powerful because they perceive not only shape, colour, size and so forth but encounter, of course, the representation of a figure with a face. Here the interactive and exploratory character of perception is especially clear. The pilgrim is drawn into "dialogue" with the image, a sense of offering of self to the presented stimulus. It is probably no surprise, therefore, that darshan is considered a process not only of seeing but of being seen by the image/deity. Pilgrims talk affectionately about the characteristics of the Ayyappan image - the posture and warm glow. If the pilgrimage process is characterised, in general, by encounter and the unfolding of meaning, taking darshan is the principal moment of engagement with a manifestation of presence and disclosure.

The participants in a pilgrimage journey, especially if it is undertaken frequently, acquire an orientation within a perceptual gestalt. They become attuned to perceiving and noticing innumerable aspects of the whole event. Gradually, they can become skilful as pilgrims, knowing how to perform rituals and constituent activities. Later this may confer prestige on them as they display skill and know-how. They may become a *guruswami* or pilgrim leader. They will learn how to incorporate their experiences into a wider narrative; perhaps becoming knowledgeable about certain doctrines or historical facts. But, as we have seen, it would be wrong to construe the encounter with meaning during pilgrimage as derived simply from a capacity for "knowing that" - projecting conceptions outwards from a stock of statements and beliefs. This is why I have emphasised perceptual encounter, and the attunement of perceptual processes.

(iii) Sensations, pain and anxiety.

If we consider now the bodily sensations of pilgrimage, we will have to emphasize particularly the fact that these engage the whole physical subject as an embodied self with a particular personal history. They do not directly reveal publicly observable qualities of the pilgrimage, subtle features of melody or landscape, as we have been discussing for perception. Instead, they reveal "goings on" in the body. One could say that they concern "states of the self". These states are then especially powerful in stimulating the so-called cognitive faculties - imagining and remembering - which we will consider in the next section. The most notable of the pilgrimage sensations, as Daniel emphasized for Sabarimala, is pain.

Prabhakaran referred to the difficulty of walking over sharp stones whilst descending Karimala (c.f. Daniel 1984:267). Other Sabarimala pilgrims referred to the discomfort which developed in the neck from the weight of the *irumudi* pressing down on the head. Mathew commented that almost everyone develops some pains on the long walk to Manjinikara but "they are helped to get through by the Bawa". The deliberate endurance of pain and discomfort is a recurrent theme in pilgrims' comments. Valsa referred to her determination to walk as much as possible, even though she had a very young baby, since the pilgrimage was an act of thanksgiving for the birth. Vishnu was equally committed to rolling around the Sabarimala shrine, on the hard, dusty and extremely hot surface. Prabhakaran and Rajan were emphatic about strictly observing the periods of abstinence, the *vratham*, as an undertaking of beneficial hardship. Of course, all of these experiences are incorporated into the general theme of penance, with salvation being achieved through acceptance of sufferings. This is a point to which we will return later.

The discomfort of the journey can be much increased by weather conditions. Whilst walking to Manjinikara, people often said to me "it's not the distance, it's the heat". "I never thought I would make it given how much I dislike heat" said one Sivagiri pilgrim. During the pilgrimage to North Paravur, the heat became almost unbearable, since it takes place at the hottest time of the year, in late April. Varghese kept repeating the importance of drinking enough water. By contrast, the Mulanthuruthy and Parumala pilgrimages, in September and November respectively, are much more likely to be affected by rain. Whilst I found this uncomfortable during a heavy downpour, this is probably my own idiosyncrasy since many of my companions thought it funny, and simply marched on regardless.

The topic of pain, and discomfort, must be approached with due consideration of the fact that any subject lives as an integrated bodily and social self. The importance of this is emphasized by Kleinman and Kleinman (1996). Pain is - scientifically speaking - a very complex psychophysiological phenomenon with a strong social dimension. It is worth noting, for example, that pain has been shown to be a frequent symptom of emotional disorder amongst Britons (Bridges and Goldberg 1985). This may be at least as much the case in other cultures. In addition, many pains - headaches, as well as facial, chest and abdominal pains - can be said to interact with psychological processes. Anxiety and depression are frequent accompaniments to severe pain regardless of whether the pain is considered to have an organic basis or not (Tyrer 1986, Katon et al 1985, Feinmann et al 1984).

In view of the psychophysiological character of pain, it can reasonably be suggested that the anxiety of undertaking a pilgrimage, which may be very intense, could exacerbate some pains whether these are present before the pilgrimage or acquired during it. On the other hand, a reduction in anxiety, combined with mounting excitement and perhaps elation, on approaching the destination could help to alleviate pain. This would interact with the subjective sense of deepened devotion and imminent encounter with divinity - in one respect sustaining these experiences, but also confirming them. The experiences of Avirachan, Prabhakaran, and indeed myself, as well as many others, illustrate this phenomenology of pilgrimage pain. This does not in any way imply that "genuine" healing of organic disease does not occur. However, it does highlight the importance of the so-called "psychosomatic phenomena", which are vivid manifestations of the integrated wholeness of the human subject. The experience of an intensification of pain, and also fatigue, followed by its alleviation during pilgrimage is one of the most frequently mentioned and subjectively powerful features of the whole undertaking for participants. [c.f. Jean Jackson (1994) on chronic pain].

The impact which pilgrimage can have on negative emotional states, anxiety, depression and so forth, whether connected with pain and physical ailment or with other life-problems, is a recurrent theme in the comments of many pilgrims. The accounts of Thomas, Thankachan and Vishnu all testify to the efficacy of pilgrimage in relieving some of the psychological difficulties associated with life situations. There can be some relief both for those who face practical problems with their associated anxiety, for example childbirth and employment worries for the three aforementioned pilgrims, and for those who like to see the pilgrimage as a thoroughly spiritual affair. For the former, practical benefits are anticipated as the



solution to the problem, whereas in the latter case attainment of simple "peace of mind", as Rajan put it, may be sufficient. In either case, however, it would be reasonable to conjecture that the sense of placing personal matters into the control of divinity is facilitated, one might say necessitated, by the simultaneous experience of diminished control over one's own basic bodily sensations and physical state during the pilgrimage. One cannot but surrender to divine will if one has become battered by submitting to the full perceptual and sensory impact of the pilgrimage process.

The inter-play of the phenomena of bodily sensation (principally pain and tiredness), emotional difficulties, and hope (in anticipated benefits from the pilgrimage) shows that the experiences of pilgrims cannot really be considered separately from the reasons and underlying needs which motivate their pilgrimage. These may or may not be conscious and articulated. But, as we have seen, the phenomenological standpoint emphasizes that all of human life - perceptions, sensations and behaviour - are "motivated" in a significant sense. This point can be developed now by considering the processes of imagining, remembering and deliberating - the cognitive performances - which become an integral part of the conduct of pilgrimage, and contribute to the creation of meaning and, later, narratives concerning it.

## **Cognitive Performance - Remembering and Imagining during Pilgrimage.**

We can now turn to the various personal behaviours and performances which engage with the meanings, perceptions and sensations of the previous discussion. These often take a private and covert form, as conveyed by our proposition three, and are frequently referred to as "cognitive" processes. Unfortunately this term is potentially misleading, as we have noted, since it is often taken to imply that these matters are mental or psychological and so not bodily, behavioural or emotional (Costall and Still 1987). This clearly contradicts the claim of our proposition two; even separating these matters from perception and sensation is potentially hazardous. These are phenomena which, as ever, involve a subject fully engaged with their social and physical environment. The difference from perception and sensation is contained in the fact that there is often an element of self-regulation, through internal monologue/dialogue and a mixture of spontaneous and guided recollection or imagination. The notions of active elaboration, interpretation and evaluation can gain an entry here, in a way which is distinct from the pre-conscious perceptual attunement considered previously.

The processes of remembering, imagining and private speech with which we will be concerned here are not typically susceptible to simple observation. Instead we need to draw upon a combination of spontaneous comments and considered reports which can be obtained from pilgrims. As we have seen, the latter are presented in the form of stories, as retrospectively constructed narratives. Some caution is required here, of course, because the process of narrative construction presents its own opportunities for embellishment and refining of detail. Nonetheless, these accounts may succeed in conveying valuable information about genuine situations which comprise encounter with, and elaboration of, meaning within the experiences of pilgrimage.

Consideration of the so-called cognitive processes which can engage with the perceptions and sensations of pilgrimage will require, probably, the most technical discussion of the current work. It will be clearest if presented together with a detailed discussion of another writer who has tackled some of these themes, Thomas Csordas (1994).

### **(i) Remembering.**

A suggestive example of the significance of remembering during pilgrimage can be found in Irawati Karve's description of undertaking the walk to Pandharpur in Maharashtra, which I will quote quite fully:

I ... used to see an old woman off and on. Once somebody asked her, "Grandma, where are your children, your grandchildren? What do they do?" The old woman closed her eyes, her face became strangely desolate, and she began to shake. We all got frightened, went near her, and held her tightly with our arms.

"Grandma, please wake up. Drink this water," said I.

Her frail body was shivering in my arms. And then I remembered. I had a dog once and her puppy died; she had also shivered like that and I had drawn her to myself and felt her body quivering in my arms. How near we are to the animals, I had thought! After some time, the old woman stopped shaking. Tears streamed down from her closed eyes and the dumb grief found words. She told her story. And what was her sorrow? Hers was of the same kind as the others: her only son had died in his early twenties. (Karve 1988:168).

The memories recalled by the pilgrims in my own data are generally of a happier quality. Thomas, as we have seen, invariably remembers the birth of his son, who is named after the saint, and the anxiety which surrounded the delivery during one pilgrimage, each time he makes a subsequent walk to Manjinikara. Valsa's pilgrimages recall the birth of her first child, and the initial strenuous pilgrimage which they undertook together in thanksgiving. Thankachan's pilgrimages recall and honour his mother, who is noted as being, probably, the first woman to undertake the walk to Manjinikara. These are memories which concern important individuals and life-events and which have become entwined with the hopes and hardships of earlier pilgrimages.

Any particular pilgrimage can draw significance from life-situations which are current or previous - especially if these are themselves associated with earlier pilgrimages. If the events recalled are happy and hopeful, the value of expressing joy or gratitude is probably quite obvious. But even where the memories are sad, we can suggest that the act of recalling them during pilgrimage could enable a full expression of grief and emotional pain, in a context within which there is a general expectation that such suffering can be alleviated, as for physical pain, or at least given meaning as an offering, a sacrifice to divinity.

## (ii) Imagining

An important ingredient in the healing of emotional wounds, painful memories and physical discomfort seems to be the use of "transformative" imagination. Active imagination clearly plays an important role throughout the performance of the pilgrimage, and afterwards. This is implied by several of the pilgrim's accounts

which I have presented. It can include imagination applied to historical and mythological events. Here pilgrims draw upon established traditions in stressing to themselves important themes, for example, that the forest trail to Sabarimala is the actual route taken by Ayyappan or the footprint at the top of Malayattur was left by St Thomas after retreating for meditation. The Way of the Cross devotions at Malayattur provide a clear example of the prayerful use of active imagination. More strongly emphasized in the pilgrims' personal accounts, however, is the element of imagination involved in making sense of their own specific experiences which they have undergone during the journey.

Avirachan described how he became almost unconscious on approaching the tomb at Manjinikara after he had prayed for healing of the pain in his arm. He felt the Bawa say to him "you should come every year, and I will always be with you". It is not entirely obvious whether Avirachan's experience is better conceived as a spontaneous appraisal, at that time, of particular feelings or a more considered retrospective interpretation of some vague sensations. We might even conjecture that he experienced an auditory hallucination - it might have been possible to distinguish these if a researcher had been present at the time. However, rather than be troubled by the ambiguities here it would be most appropriate to recognize, in a manner stressed by Merleau-Ponty, that frequently the phenomena of life are ambiguous. It is an ambiguity inherent both in "things as they happen" and, very often, in what we feel inclined to say about them afterwards. The emphasis on this point in Merleau-Ponty's thought parallels, to a degree, the conception of indeterminacy in human practices and situations in the work of Bourdieu (1977:140-3, 1990:262-70). The significance of the phenomena can be discerned, even though ambiguity persists.

In some cases an informant will insist that the experience at the time definitely felt to be of a certain kind, in other cases they will suggest that retrospective interpretation has led them to a certain view of an experience. For example, Prasad was adamant that he definitely felt pushed by someone present - and who else could it have been but Ayyappan? - when he fell down after gazing lustfully at a young girl. On the other hand, Sukumaran emphasised that only after some time did he and his party come to think that the young man who helped them when they were lost might be Ayyappan himself. There was a fairly active process of deliberation and interpretation. In yet other instances - Avirachan's may be one of these - the situation seems inherently enigmatic and ambiguous. Rather than attempt to impose an artificial clarity beyond that which is really possible, we should recognise that both spontaneous and deliberate use of imagination, drawing upon more or less veridical

perceptions and sensations, are likely to play a part in enriching the pilgrimage process. We can use the word "imaginal" to cover the full range of such processes. Imagination plays a part but we should not therefore consider the experiences as "false" or "unreal". The term "imaginal" carries no rationalistic presuppositions concerning the precise reality, or chain of causation, which underlies the phenomena reported.

The most important theme in pilgrims' accounts relating to imaginal processes are the experiences of encounter with divinity. These are a feature of many of the comments and narratives provided by pilgrims and clearly comprise one of the most memorable features of pilgrimage and, in fact, a justification for it. They may occur abruptly or gradually; they may take place during or at the conclusion of the pilgrimage. They are of profound subjective significance for the pilgrim and often relate to significant ongoing life-situations. The stories of Prasad and Avirachan suggest that the manifestation of divine presence can enable the pilgrim to feel less vulnerable and alone, either in the physical journey or in the wider difficulties of life.

(iii) Csordas on remembering and imagining.

It would be useful at this point to draw upon some insights into the roles of remembering and imagination in the phenomenology of religious experience provided by Csordas (1994). His study concerns Catholic charismatic healing in northeastern United States. He takes a committedly phenomenological approach and discusses a number of issues which are relevant to the present context. His central focus is upon "self-processes", by which he means the behaviours and activities which we have described as largely private or covert, in accordance with proposition three. Csordas also emphasises the fact that the self-processes engage the whole embodied subject (as in our proposition two) and respond to, or elaborate, meanings which are immanent in particular situations (proposition one). He says "the particular self-processes that I have found articulated in charismatic healing are imagination, memory, language and emotion" (Csordas 1994:IX). Here we will be concerned with imagination, memory and private monologue/dialogue with their associated emotional colouring. We will return to some further points about language at the end of the chapter.

In accordance with his emphasis upon phenomenology, Csordas bemoans the fact that "although anthropologists have produced volumes of descriptions of healing rituals, they have virtually never systematically examined the experience of supplicants in healing". They refer, instead, to a "limited repertoire of global

mechanisms" which "include trance, catharsis, placebo effect and suggestion" but "the mechanism itself remains unelaborated, a kind of biocultural 'black box' " (ibid:3). By contrast, Csordas proposes to provide detail and specificity in his accounts, in particular by attending to "experiential commentaries" (ibid:117). These are reports provided by informants following healing sessions, which correspond to the experientially oriented accounts provided by pilgrims in my own work. By use of such material, Csordas is able to shed light on the self-processes, active imagining and remembering, which are central to charismatic healing. He can examine these both in the context of public healings during group worship and, especially, in private consultations. During the latter, a priest or counsellor guides the client through a process of engaging with emotionally charged memories and imaginings. In this situation the priest or counsellor typically plays a role as interpreter as well, suggesting to the supplicant the meanings, the possible "interpretants", of the various sensations and images which are experienced (ibid:102-6).

Although many aspects of the charismatic healing sessions are distinctive, there are significant features of Csordas' material which can be related to the experience of pilgrimage. He is careful to avoid reifying the notions of image or memory, but emphasises that imagining and remembering are activities entered into by subjects under particular circumstances. He also considers the role of "somatic attention" in the self-processes of healing. By use of somatic attention, a subject can comprehend, and respond to, their own bodily sensations, pains and disabilities in a way which reduces the anger or anxiety which might otherwise be there. They can achieve the opposite of hypochondriacal over-reaction. The significance of this was noted in the phenomenology of Alfred Schutz (ibid:67). We noted earlier that the extremely intense physical and emotional processes of pilgrimage might accomplish similar transformations in a subject's management of their own bodily sensations.

Csordas makes use of phenomenological insights from the work of the philosopher Edward Casey (1976, 1987), cited earlier for his recent work on space and place (Casey 1997). Casey has discussed the important point, which we have touched upon, that imagination can often seem spontaneous, arising " 'out of the blue'. It is at once profoundly of the self but at the same time is also experienced as profoundly other, in a way which is ripe for thematization as the sacred Other acting with the self" (Csordas 1994:94; Casey 1976, chapter three). This is a critical point because, as we have seen, the ambiguous and enigmatic quality of imaginal processes in situations of intense stimulation and arousal enables them to acquire a sort of revelatory character.

One of the key points of Csordas' discussion is that the healing process involves change, often of a gradual and incremental nature (Csordas 1994:123). It can be necessary for the client to move slowly to a point at which they can acknowledge emotional pain, and then attempt to "let it go"; this is especially so if it results from past trauma, say abuse. This resembles the gradual unfolding of the pilgrimage experience during a protracted journey. It is a process which may in fact be repeated on subsequent occasions, later pilgrimages, as the supplicant struggles with related concerns. Perhaps in both cases it is necessary to establish, first of all, the expectation of change - and therefore the vital ingredient of hope - before improvement is actually felt to occur.

A significant difference between pilgrimage and charismatic healing is that, at least for the pilgrimages of the present context, there is no extended encounter between pilgrim and religious specialist or healer. Sessions of guided healing worship do occur in Kerala, and their locations are sometimes referred to as pilgrim centres, but they are quite distinct from the ritualised journeys with which we are concerned. From the phenomenological standpoint, the significant difference between pilgrimage and charismatic healing is that the latter incorporates processes of guided imagining and remembering which are much more structured and rely more heavily on interpretation by the specialist. Pilgrimage is generally less structured but it is certainly not unstructured. Indeed the degree of organisation and symbolic elaboration may be such that the pilgrim can be said to be guided through an experiential process with fairly standard characteristics. The clearest example of this is perhaps the following of the Way of the Cross devotions in the ascent of Malayattur. It is a situation which can be looked upon as the unfolding of a "self-process" with potential psychotherapeutic value. For pilgrimage, however, the guidance provided by the verbal instruction of a specialist is less. There is a correspondingly greater emphasis upon openness to the whole range of meanings and experiences which we have been considering in this section. There is a fluidity and unpredictability about pilgrimage which surpasses that of guided healing sessions. On the one hand this allows for the occurrence of apparently spontaneous instances of "revelation" to pilgrims, as we have seen, but on the other it permits the possibility of the journey becoming routinised for some participants, with little experiential power.

Since performance of pilgrimage is not guided to the same extent as charismatic healing, there is no clear analogue to the counsellor or psychotherapist who conducts the private sessions for supplicants within charismatic circles. Pilgrimage leaders

and *guruswamis* may take a strong interest in some of their companions, but the general expectation is that all participants allow themselves to submit to an entire situation which may elicit various responses, without undue emphasis upon the instructions of one or two people. This is why the multifaceted quality of the phenomenology of perception and sensation within the journey is important and has been emphasised. Perception, and its attunement, features more strongly in my account than that of Csordas. Many of the experiences are encountered directly without mediation from any other individual.

The charismatics often emphasise a process of autobiographical review, recalling and re-evaluating major life events. This is interesting because we have suggested that pilgrimage has a tendency to encourage a similar process. Whilst their comments are not subjected to the formal scrutiny of a specialist, it is notable that the old woman who spoke to Karve, as well as various of my own informants, Avirachan and Thomas for example, recounted experiences as though undertaking such a review of key life events. There is a difference in tone, however, because charismatic theology often emphasises the possibility of demonic possession which may need to be resolved. The pilgrims, by contrast, often enjoy reflecting on the lighter side of pilgrimage in their reminiscences, for example the physical challenge, sociability and entertainments, as well as commenting on the multiple political ramifications of the events.

The most important respect in which the phenomenology provided by Csordas can be said to overlap with the current material is in the fact that the processes of remembering and imagining tend to lead towards a core experience which constitutes a decisive culmination to the entire undertaking. This is the sense of encounter with saint or deity, the experiencing of divine presence. As Csordas says "the synthesis of motor, sensory, affective and spiritual experiences constitute divine presence as an experiential gestalt" (ibid:244). The personal relationship with divinity is strengthened, and, from the standpoint of faith, this constitutes the key to transformation for the individual in both pilgrimage and charismatic healing. It can help to establish hope and positive expectation for troubled supplicants (ibid:132), dissipating "depressogenic thoughts" (ibid:220), enabling them to reach a stage of "letting go" of pain or problems surrounding the anxious need to "stay in control" which may be counter-productive in many problematic situations (ibid:127, 247, 258).

(iv) Control



Dispelling anxiety whilst at the same time acknowledging the inherent uncontrollability of some events is certainly important in some of the situations recounted by pilgrims earlier. Childbirth is an example of this - Vishnu and Valsa are able to use the pilgrimage to put matters into the hands of Ayyappan or the Bawa. Establishing hope and maintaining determination in unpredictable situations were no doubt important for handling both the problem of Avirachan's pain and Thankachan's wife's employment difficulties. A combination of all of these forms of psychological renewal probably helps to sustain Rajan in his stressful medical duties, not only during the pilgrimage but at other times as well.

The problem of "depressogenic thoughts" has been explored by psychologists of the cognitive-behavioural school, for example in the work of Beck et al (1979) (cited by Csordas 1994: 220). The basic claim of these writers is that people can be said to habitually employ automatic thoughts which have probably been conditioned by all kinds of past circumstances but which persist in the present despite being largely unhelpful and emotionally damaging. Highly anxious and hypochondriacal assessments of one's own pains and health concerns would be an example. It is argued from this that a reconditioning of these spontaneous thoughts is a necessary requirement for healing, and cannot be treated as merely a secondary consequence of improving the person's predicament. Avirachan's concern over his physical pain might be an example of this, as might a tendency to guilty thoughts on the part of childless couples, who may be disposed to think, as a result of adverse comments which are frequent in Kerala culture, that they are at fault.

The psychological urge to "stay in control" is worth reflecting upon. Themes of this kind have been explored extensively in psychological literature, notably in the "locus of control" research of Julian Rotter (1966, 1982, 1990). The main point made by this work is that people vary in their assessments of how far they are in control of events and experiences in their lives. This can be demonstrated even though the degree of objective control by a subject is held constant in experimental conditions. There are two significant points here. Firstly, individuals range between those with an "internal locus of control" - a tendency to attribute control to themselves - and those with an "external locus of control" who judge that events are controlled by other people or fate. Secondly, individuals generally strive to maximise the internality of their locus of control; as far as possible boosting their confidence that they are in control of events. The advantages of this are fairly obvious. In difficult and ambiguous circumstances one is more likely to be persistent, and therefore possibly increase one's objective level of control, if belief in one's own efficacy is

maximised. Maximising the internality ("self-belief") in one's locus of control is, one could say, good for morale. But there is a down side. In some situations the use of habitual control-oriented behaviour patterns could exacerbate stress without productive outcome. For example, a victim of a stroke may need to rely upon natural recovery, and accept some degree of disability, rather than continuously attempt to counteract their condition and resist their state. I suggest that this may have been significant for my fellow-pilgrim to Sabarimala who had recently suffered a stroke. For such an individual the performance of a pilgrimage could achieve more than simply a reduction of anxiety. It comprises a training in partial surrender, adopting the attitude of "thy will be done" - accepting an external locus of control. In this light, pilgrimage can be seen as one of the few instances in an individual's life in which there is a major undertaking - an arduous journey - which has the character of encouraging dependence, and a shift from emphasis upon an internal to an external locus of control (Csordas frequently refers to the phenomenology of control, for examples 1994:221-7).

Of course, the shift of locus of control is not projected onto an inchoate external domain. What is encouraged is dependence upon the deity. The key point is that the diminished sense of control on the part of the pilgrim is compensated for by the experience of strengthened relationship with divinity. The issue of transformation of relationship will be taken up in the next sub-section. Here, however, it is necessary to emphasise that, phenomenologically, these are matters which engage the cognitive processes of the present discussion - the individual's imaginative conception of the manner in which their life situation is affected by the pilgrimage.

(v) Dialogue - real and imaginal.

The inter-relationship of cognitive and relationship processes can be said to run very deep, when considered from the phenomenological perspective. We should question Western assumptions concerning a highly individualised self, whose cognitive performances proceed in solipsistic isolation. Probably this has always been a questionable basis from which to think about other cultures. However, some Western psychologists have recently taken up the challenge to replace our own old assumptions. Drawing upon the work of phenomenologists and developmental psychologists there have been attempts to develop a more dialogical conception of the self. This approach emphasises the importance of imagination, and related cognitive processes, whilst acknowledging the prominence of dialogue and encounter within the exercise of these faculties, whether employed covertly or not.

The work of Mary Watkins is a valuable contribution towards developing renewed conceptions of self, mind, and cognition. Her study "Invisible Guests: The Development of Imaginal Dialogues" (Watkins 1986) discusses the importance for the child of developing a capacity to engage in private, imaginal dialogues. This leads to the enrichment of imagination and goes on to underlie much adult thought, she argues. This is despite the fact that thinkers such as Vygotsky and Mead tended to downplay the notion of dialogue in favour of internal monologue (Watkins 1986 Chapter 2).

The implications of Watkins' point of view are clear, prevailing Western prejudices notwithstanding. It can be said to be entirely natural for humans to talk to their absent family and friends, their deceased relatives, their Gods and innumerable fictional characters through private dialogue. This is dialogue with a strong imaginal component, regardless of whether or not it features actual, audible vocalization. It retains a generally voluntary character in contrast to the exchanges with intrusive voices which characterise hallucinatory mental disorder. One can regard prayer as a special case of this behaviour. In related manner, Esther Goody considers prayer to be a form of natural dialogue emerging from human "social intelligence" (Goody 1995).

As Watkins argues, particularly from a consideration of the creative imagination of artists, imaginal dialogue is in no way primitive or childish. It is important for mature adult performance as well. For the present context, the critical point is that imaginal dialogue could be actively encouraged by the process of pilgrimage. This is apparent, for example, in Avirachan's experience, and the process of imaginative prayer for pilgrims at Malayattur. Its healing potential has long been a matter of interest for psychotherapists, for example James Hillman (1983) who refers to the work of both Jung and Adler, a fact which is drawn upon by some charismatic healers.

As we go on to explore the issue of relationships directly, we will need to be aware that we are often dealing with imaginal elements, especially imaginal dialogue, particularly in the interaction with divinity. In considering relationships in the present context, it is the experiential dimension and how this can change as a result of pilgrimage which is foremost. Consequently, a phenomenological approach is needed which attends both to imaginal and real components. Most significant relationships tend to be a subtle blend of these two aspects, combining needs, fantasies and expectations as well as "real" facts. From the point of view of the subject, these components create the "Objects", as they are called by Object Relations

theorists, the significant Others with whom they engage and who become, as a result of this, internalised within them. This is so whether it is a relationship with a saint or deity or with a parent, spouse, child or friend.

## **Pilgrimage and the Phenomenology of Relationships.**

The phenomenological perspective emphasizes the fact that all people are, from the outset, immersed in a social world. However, in attempting to conceptualize this state of affairs it argues that we still face dangers from premature abstraction and inappropriate objectification. In particular, in the wake of empiricism and intellectualism in the Western tradition, many thinkers presuppose some set of reified entities, whether symbols or sensations, ideas or beliefs, rules or representations which mediate between individuals, and so provide building blocks for the socio-cultural world. Unfortunately, from these conceptual atoms, whole human beings, personally and bodily engaged with their lifeworld, have little chance of emerging. Instead, one usually becomes trapped within the twilight world of the old dualisms, with the result that gaps between mind and body, culture and nature and, especially, self and other are never satisfactorily bridged.

Previously, we emphasised the omnipresence of meaning in the human world, as that which is brought forth in the activities of perception and sensation, and thence also remembering, imagining and internal dialogue. This plenum of meaning is nowhere more important than in a subject's encounter with the social world. It emanates from the presence of other people, artefacts, communications and all other residues of human activity. The significance of these situations is not captured by an a priori commitment to concepts such as rules or representations; in part because these notions disguise the variety of situations in which indeterminacy, ambiguity or superfluity of meaning can be found. In addition such abstractions tend to ignore the intrinsically motivated character of almost all social encounter, with differing purposes, desires and personal histories impinging upon simple situations, whether noticing someone's unused pipe (a favourite example of French philosophy), cradling an infant or praying to God. These are some of the implications of our earlier propositions one and two for considering the subject's encounter with the social world.

It will certainly be necessary to take account, also, of the implications of proposition three. That is, many of the significant phenomena of the social world occur within the private sphere. This is so because the subject becomes engaged through the use of all of the components of the bodily self, emotions, memories, desires etc., although these are often not fully expressed and therefore not accessible to detached observation. In addition, many of the social interactions with significant others, within which significant aspects of the self can find expression, may take place in private, in the home or wherever, well away from public gaze. Therefore, one needs

Careful enquiry, with subjectively oriented discussions and focused interviews- a hetero-phenomenological approach as I have called it in trying to understand my fellow pilgrims. Csordas stressed the importance of both his observations from healing sessions and the experiential commentaries which he obtained from clients. In another ethnographic context, Abu-Lughod (1993) shows the value of personal testimony in her work on Bedouin women. Some South Asian ethnographies have ventured to explore relationship processes in a complementary manner, though these have tended to be more explicitly psychoanalytical than phenomenological. Kurtz (1992), Trawick (1990) and especially Obeyesekere (1981) have provided valuable examples.

(i) Strengthening the relationship with the saint/deity.

Themes connected with relationships occur throughout the personal accounts provided by pilgrim informants. This reflects the fact that the strengthening of the relationship with saint or deity is generally regarded as essential to the pilgrimage process, and this in turn is considered the key to ensuring practical benefits in the problems of life which, themselves, frequently centre around principal relationships. The accounts provided by Prabhakaran and Sukamaram focus on occasions of encounter with divinity; this is significant in its own right, but we can conjecture further that, since they both travel with their sons and close friends, these events can acquire significance as shared experiences. Ayyappan's apparent self-manifestation, occurring, as it seems to do, to pilgrims who are lost or physically struggling, can convey the sense that not only is the individual as pilgrim not alone in the journey, but also the group including family and friends is not alone, but guided by the deity. In this way devotion to Ayyappan can become a cherished personal possession which is shared by being passed on from father to son, and between close friends, and affirmed each year during the annual pilgrimage.

Thankachan described encouraging his wife to deepen her faith in the Patriarch at Manjinikara as a way of handling a problem which had repercussions for both of them. She promised to undertake a pilgrimage if she was successful in transferring her work to a location nearer to their home. Problems which, by their nature, affect a family demand some kind of joint response. Pilgrimage permits this, perhaps especially if the participant in the pilgrimage is the individual who can otherwise shoulder less of the practical responsibility for managing the problem. In this way, they take on their share.

The most prominent shared problems which are encountered amongst pilgrims concern childbirth. Thomas described his anxiety concerning his wife and soon-to-be born child when he was told to hurry back from participating in the Manjinikara pilgrimage one year. In his concern, he prayed to the Patriarch. He thereby strengthened his own relationship with the saint and, in effect, that of his wife and new-born son, especially when the latter was given, as promised, the saint's name Elias. Again, we can see the joint shouldering of responsibility in this situation for, although Thomas hurried back, there was probably a limited amount that he could do in the circumstances; making a vow to the Patriarch was his principal contribution. This incident, and the relationships of those concerned - both with each other and the saint - are recalled during their subsequent pilgrimages, as Thomas himself emphasised.

The theme of childbirth was prominent in accounts provided by both Valsa and Vishnu as well. For the former, subsequent pilgrimages to Manjinikara can be seen as an act of thanksgiving for the birth of the child, with the whole family able to participate in the journey in the year following the birth, and subsequently. This contrasts with the situation for Sabarimala, as exemplified by Vishnu's case. Here he is concerned about a pregnancy and childbirth, but women of reproductive age are barred from the pilgrimage. Therefore, his journey can be seen, quite strikingly, as an individual shouldering some of the burden of the problem. This is significant because childlessness is more readily blamed on the woman in Kerala culture. No doubt Vishnu will be interested to encourage his son to have enthusiasm for the pilgrimage, and will be able to explain some of the particular significance of it to his son and family. It is worth noting from this example that it is not necessary for all the individuals concerned in any particular life situation to participate in the pilgrimage. The significance of the undertaking is likely to be apparent to all, and for each person may facilitate a greater enthusiasm for the cult of saint or deity, regardless of whether or not they make the journey.

(ii) How important is sex?

Rather different from the above example, but nonetheless very interesting, is the pilgrimage experience described by Prasad. He swooned and, as he said, felt himself to be pushed over after he had felt sexually aroused by the sight of a young girl during the Sabarimala pilgrimage. This should be a time of abstinence and pure thought. The dramatic quality of the consequence of his momentary lust suggests strong guilt, or, at least, a very intense anxiety to fulfil the requirements of the period of purity. One could conjecture that the crisis permitted the expression of some

degree of frustration on the part of a young unmarried man who is, in fact, inclined to hint at the vexations of his single state. More mundanely, exhaustion and reduced intake of food and water could have disposed him to faint. As ever, the meaning of the incident is shrouded in some ambiguity.

Frustrations and difficulties with relationships are prone to manifest within pilgrimage, and indeed can motivate it. This is the central theme of Obeyesekere's study "Medusa's Hair" (Obeyesekere 1981). Prasad's account reminded me of the discussion in this book. Obeyesekere's ethnography includes a number of case studies illustrating ways in which pilgrimage cult devotees ameliorate situations characterised by unsatisfactory relationships and significant psychological struggle. This notably includes, but is not restricted to, sexual relationships. In Obeyesekere's view, this is achieved primarily by the elaboration of personal symbolic meanings which are grafted onto the culturally endorsed symbols of the particular cult. The principal point of overlap with my own material is the theme of pilgrimage activity affecting critical personal relationships, including problematic aspects of them (or their absence, as in Prasad's case). However, Obeyesekere's informants usually become very deeply immersed in their religiosity, to a point where they almost make a career out of it. They become known in their neighbourhoods as specialists in achieving possession, giving prophecy or practising self-mortification. This is not a characteristic of my own informants, although some, such as Avirachan and Prabhakaran, are certainly proud to be regarded as very experienced, "model" pilgrims.

The various forms of intense and rather florid devotional practice described by Obeyesekere, with the possibility which this provides for improvised development of personal symbols, is not absent from the sphere of Kerala religiosity. However, it is not generally associated with the ritualised journeys being considered here, and definitely not with the Christian pilgrimages. The "model" pilgrims of these events deport themselves with restraint and dignity. On reading Obeyesekere I get an impression that intense sexual and emotional problems may be somewhat over-represented amongst his informants, as befits, perhaps, a writer with a strongly Freudian perspective. Such matters are not absent from my own material, but they are certainly not foremost. Perhaps individuals with such problems are especially attracted to the Kataragama cult in Sri Lanka with which Obeyesekere is concerned. One would have to look to some of the Mother Goddess temples in Kerala, probably, to find any significant parallel there.



It is worth exploring the idea that one of the pilgrimage cults being considered in my own work is redolent with sexual meaning, that is, the journey to Sabarimala. Not infrequently, the suggestion is encountered in Kerala that this pilgrimage is coloured by a generally homoerotic quality (this point was first brought to my attention by D Menon - personal communication, Trivandrum July 1994). There is the fact that it involves parties of pilgrims who are mostly or exclusively male, often young and single. Traditionally, they stay together during much of the preparation period preceding the pilgrimage, for group devotions and avoidance of worldly distractions. They travel together, both day and night, during a physically demanding and emotionally intense journey. At the destination they pay their respects to a deity who was born of the union of two male deities, Vishnu and Siva. The pilgrim is said to attain a state of union with the Lord, which is vividly symbolised by the breaking of a coconut, and pouring of ghee from within it over the image.

Whilst the allegedly homoerotic features of the Sabarimala pilgrimage are suggestive, it seems to me appropriate to stress that this element, even if acknowledged, is subordinate to the primary emphasis on celibacy. Pilgrims must abstain from sex, as well as meat and liquor, for a forty-one day period (sometimes sixty-one) and women of reproductive age are barred. Ayyappan at Sabarimala is above all a celibate deity. Tradition maintains that he must be visited by at least one new pilgrim each year or else he will be required to marry his divine female admirer who is otherwise confined to her own shrine some distance away from his. Significantly, it is often commented that the spiritual, even miraculous, quality of Jacobite pilgrimages is shown by the fact that men and women travel together but no one misbehaves or is distracted, it is said, by lustful thoughts.

Should we choose between the homoerotic angle and the celibacy theme? Should we disregard both of them? My own preference would be to acknowledge an inherent ambiguity and indeterminacy here, not just in the meaning of particular symbols - which Obeyesekere argues facilitate the elaboration of personal meanings (Obeyesekere:51) - but in the quality of lived human experience. This is a recurrent theme in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and led him in "The Visible and Invisible" (1968) to develop an interesting dialectical response to Freud's work. Merleau-Ponty agreed with psychoanalysis that meanings pervade human behaviour and experience, including sexual meanings and emotional resonances, which are often kept private. The subject either carefully avoids direct expression of them, or else pursues standard routines of behaviour within which the likelihood of conscious attention to such matters is reduced. This can be done with a certain amount of

success despite the fact that biological meanings and motives have a tendency to force their own expression.

Broad principles of a psychoanalytic type can, therefore, be said to be fully consistent with, and indeed overlap, the three basic propositions of our phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty was, however, generally sceptical about the possibility of a precise demarcation between the conscious and the unconscious, and rejected the idea of a rigid boundary between them. His manner of conceptualising the distinction was, characteristically, drawn from the study of perception. The unconscious is akin to the unnoticed, therefore unspoken, background in any perceptual gestalt, which contrasts with the figure to which the perceiver attends and for which a description can be attempted. But this is a distinction which is constantly shifting and ambiguous. As we noted in the perception of "aspect seeing" (Wittgenstein and the duck-rabbit picture), much will habitually elude the attention of any particular perceiver (see Olkawski 1993) but this does not mean that certain features are invariably beyond attention, forever banished by a process of repression.

If we pursue this perspective whilst looking for sexual motifs within the Sabarimala pilgrimage, there seems no good reason to discount the possibility that homoerotic significance could be discerned at times, as well as the more obvious emphasis upon celibacy. However, if this is the case, there is no compelling reason for maintaining that this would invariably be beyond the domain of conscious awareness. Therefore, in the absence of evidence for its manifestation provided by pilgrims, even though they might be shy about such matters, it is easier to suppose that it is primarily a theme in the minds of intellectuals, from whom I have usually heard it suggested.

(iii) The varieties of significant relationship affected by pilgrimage.

On the basis of my own conversations and interviews with informants I would suggest that it is appropriate to emphasise the varieties of ways in which pilgrimage can affect key relationships, without putting undue emphasis on the sexual or any other motif. This applies to the multiple ways in which the pilgrim's subjective relationship with the saint or deity can unfold, as well as to family relationships and ties with other flesh and blood persons. For some it may be that pilgrimage enhances a sense of dependent, childlike intimacy with the deity, somewhat akin to the blankets or teddy bears which Winnicott calls "transitional objects" (Csordas considers this point 1994:154-6). Alternatively the relationship might resemble that with a stern authority figure. More complexly, it could be a father figure who comes to occupy a position somewhere between these two situations. This last possibility

seems to me to have some plausibility for pilgrims journeying to Manjinikara. The Patriarch is both a loving father but also a discipline-conscious authority figure. In this way he is especially well able to bestow affection upon those loyal to him whilst retaining some anger for the wayward people siding with the other group.

For many participants pilgrimage may provide the opportunity to renew a sense of intimacy with the saint or deity against a background of inevitable waxing and waning in the quality of relationships with significant Others in day to day life. This fluctuating quality of relationships was explored by the object relations theorist Harry Guntrip (1968, 1971). He held that the need to protect ego-identity, "a quietness at the centre, a core of personality which must be preserved inviolable" (Guntrip 1968:270), ensures that some degree of withdrawal or detachment in potentially overpowering relationships is often necessary. Regardless of the psychodynamic basis, it is consistent with the above considerations concerning the possibly ambiguous quality of relationships with the divine that devotees might sometimes experience an element of apprehension, even significant fear. Even though the saint or deity is considered generally benign, anxieties and defences might enter. Perhaps I will be judged unworthy? Perhaps I will lose control or be otherwise overwhelmed? Unworthiness is a theme which is implied by Prasad's account. It probably underlies some of the regretful comments that "we are always squabbling" which are made by Jacobites, alluding to the fact that the community has been successively embroiled in disputes. Furthermore, the fact that the Patriarch died whilst on a visit to Kerala, attempting to bring some peace to the Church, might compound an element of almost patricidal guilt, somewhat reminiscent of Freud's speculations in "Moses and Monotheism" (Freud 1985).

Similar variety can be discerned in the impact of pilgrimage on family relationships. Apart from the examples of Vishnu, Valsa, Thomas and the others already considered, many pilgrims have expressed to me concerns over employment, financial or marital issues and how these problems may affect their families. "This is because I have finally managed to get my sister married" one pilgrim explained to me during the walk to Manjinikara. By contrast, for some pilgrims it may be that the pilgrimage is valuable as an opportunity to be away from their families, as much as for undertaking a shared response to a problem. Of course this is not incompatible with those situations where only one party in the particular situation undertakes the journey in any case, say the husband proceeding alone to Sabarimala to pray for a child.

Alan Roland is a psychotherapist with an interest in Indian culture who has suggested that a need for time away might be important in pilgrimage (Roland 1988:309). In his view the need to develop a sense of one's own individuality can encourage people to pursue individualistic spirituality. Extended periods of leave from the household, or any other form of self-preoccupation away from the family, are otherwise discouraged in the context of close-knit Indian domestic life, Roland argues. Spiritual practices such as pilgrimage can function as a socially sanctioned exception to this; it has a value for the individual and the family and so can be performed by someone as their own individual venture.

By no means all pilgrims are motivated to go with their families. Avirachan is quite happy to go on his own, with whichever friends and acquaintances following who wish to participate that year. It is particularly noticeable that young men often undertake the pilgrimages with their peers and without their families. This is the case for the Jacobite journeys, as well as that to Sabarimala. Undoubtedly for some, Prasad for example, there is sincere spiritual motivation. At the same time many young men appreciate the opportunity to be away from home with their friends, possibly stopping on the way back for a movie, a drinking session or to stare at female tourists (as was noted by C Osella 1993:80-84).

There is one psychosocial problem which I noticed to be strikingly recurrent in discussions with pilgrims, to which brief reference has been made already. This is alcoholism. This is interesting because, quite apart from being a widespread problem in Kerala, it is also associated with situations in which some profound social adjustments, and maybe healing of relationships, is necessary as a step towards recovery. The pilgrimages which we have been considering all emphasise abstention from alcohol, in the case of Sabarimala for a fairly protracted period (Kjaerholm 1986:136 notes the importance of this). At the same time social transformations are possible, deepening intimacy with friends and acquaintances who are not themselves drinking. This may be a necessary prelude to the painful honesty which is often necessary for alcoholics to come to terms with their problem.

We have seen that pilgrimage enables individuals to address emotional problems of anxiety, guilt and loneliness. This is probably particularly important for the struggling alcoholic. A spiritual significance can be conferred on their problems, especially by acknowledging that many emotional and practical matters, and the drinking problem itself, may not really be under the individual's control. These matters are put into the hands of saint or deity. This enables an individual, who is probably desperately and habitually trying to internalise their "locus of control" in an

attempt to deny the chaos of their lives, to accept the futility of this struggle given their addiction to alcohol. They can then squarely face the problem. The importance of establishing a spiritual dimension to one's self-understanding, as well as the need for honesty and social support, are similarly emphasised in managing alcoholism within Western culture by the Alcoholics Anonymous organisation (Kessel and Walton 1961).

Hari, who is now a keen pilgrim to Sivagiri, told me that he was able to stop excessive drinking once he had found a renewed sense of confidence and commitment from his pilgrimages. For him it was both the experience of the journey and the enduring significance of the Guru's message which it propagates which were important. He is now an enthusiast for the anti-alcohol and other social teachings of Sri Narayana Guru. No doubt, as for members of AA in our own culture, the possibility that his experiences can be put to use in warning and helping others provides for him meaning and self-respect. Any individual's personal and social situation can be significantly altered by pilgrimage. An important ingredient in this is learning from the message of the pilgrimage and thereby from the saint or deity, as well as learning from fellow pilgrims and other participants.

## Social Learning and the Meanings of Pilgrimage

The preceding discussion has emphasised the fact that participants can be changed by the experience of pilgrimage. They become attuned to particular perceptions and sensations, they draw upon and create processes of remembering and imagining, and some of their key social relationships may be affected. All of these phenomena are themselves shaped by interaction with others during the performance of pilgrimage. These need not necessarily be the "significant Others", family and friends, with which we have been primarily concerned so far. In fact, interaction with numerous others - pilgrim leaders, priests relaying instructions and exhortations, experienced participants and countless others in the crowd - can all have an influence. The consequent process by which thought and behaviour, attitudes and emotions are moulded by a combination of empathy, imitation and direct instruction is such a fundamental feature of the pilgrimages in which I have participated that considering them as social learning experiences is, I would argue, essential to grasping their significance.

Full participation in the pilgrimages requires the acquisition of a certain amount of knowledge and competence. We saw that Avirachan makes a point of encouraging fellow pilgrims to sing along with him if they are unfamiliar with the words or melodies because this practice is an integral part of the event. Participants are expected to mirror the behaviour of others. Especially for Jacobite pilgrimages, people soon fall into line and then proceed at a similar pace to others, maintaining an air of contemplative determination, particularly during the quiet times. These effects are achieved through a combination of deliberate guidance and spontaneous mimicry. There is often imitation, more or less explicitly, of the saint or deity. Even casual observation would suggest the importance of such processes; they are particularly important in an exploration of phenomenological themes.

### (i) Modelling and Observational Learning.

The leading theorist in the area of social learning processes within psychology is Albert Bandura. His ideas are worth considering here for the light they can shed on pilgrimage. Bandura was influenced by the classic study "Social Learning and Imitation" of Miller and Dollard (1941). However, he has developed his ideas into a distinctive approach which he has called, in its fullest exposition, "social cognitive theory" (Bandura 1986). It emphasizes the joint contribution of cognitive, behavioural and environmental factors in shaping human activity. For example, a pilgrim might decide to walk a particular route through having been raised with the

conviction that it is the most hallowed (an established belief would be counted as a cognitive factor in the decision) or because he is accustomed to the path in a physical, embodied manner, traversing the terrain is practically a habit (an established behavioural disposition) or because he notices many other pilgrims going that way. This last factor is a salient environmental influence in the current situation, of a clearly social kind.

Although Bandura's terminology may sound over-abstracted, it is worth noting that the behavioural factors approximately correspond to dispositions in the "pre-conscious" responses of Merleau-Ponty's thought, whereas the cognitive factors draw attention to the more discursive processes of remembering and imagining. For the present context, the important point is Bandura's emphasis upon the possibility of both of these being influenced by social-environmental factors, specifically "modeling, tuition and social persuasion". "Modeling" here is an important, semi-technical concept covering a range of processes, from spontaneous imitation to careful observation by a pupil of a skilled performer. These give rise to "observational learning", learning from the performances of others, which parallels "enactive learning" whereby the individual is directly conditioned by the consequences of their own actions. For example, I may drape a *mundu* over my head and shoulders during a walking pilgrimage because I see others do it (observational learning) or because the sun beating down on my exposed scalp gives me a headache (enactive learning). Psychologists have tended to pay more attention to the latter. Bandura is especially interested in observational learning and, in keeping with his concern with cognitive phenomena, emphasises that it tends to proceed most readily when it actively engages the imagination of the subject (Bandura 1986:56).

The most striking example of social learning within pilgrimage, which involves modeling, attention to instruction and the active engagement of imagination, is the deliberate imitation of saint or deity. Some stress upon this process is a characteristic of practically all of the pilgrimages being considered here. For the Jacobites, the journey is said to recreate the exhausting travels which were undertaken by the prelates of earlier years when they came to India from the Middle East to reinforce the faith. Pilgrims are exhorted to manifest the same kind of fortitude and devotion which characterised these holy figures. For the Sabarimala pilgrimage, the most committed devotees can follow the path which was, according to tradition, taken by Ayyappan himself. They practise the discipline of a *brahmacarya*, a celibate and ascetic spiritual seeker, as did Ayyappan. They all dress as *swamis*, in which form Ayyappan is said to often appear amongst them as a fellow pilgrim to the shrine, thus

establishing a fully mutual identification between deity and devotee. Sukumaran, as we saw, mentioned the significance of this; he thought that he had met Ayyappan in this guise.

At Malayattur, pilgrims follow in the footsteps of St Thomas as they ascend the hill. They pray at the top, as St Thomas did according to tradition, before viewing his footprint in the rock. In addition to this, there is the popular practice of the "Way of the Cross" devotions. These are found at many Catholic sites. However, this notably imitative prayer cycle is especially favoured at Malayattur, particularly on Good Friday. The most important day of all for making the Malayattur pilgrimage is the Sunday after Easter. It is on this day that pilgrims can identify with St Thomas on the occasion of his encounter with the risen Christ, when he felt the wound in Jesus' side, and exclaimed "My Lord and My God". This is portrayed in pictures and statues on display at the pilgrim centre, and elsewhere. Pilgrims are, in a sense, in a comparable situation to Thomas, craving their own encounter with the Lord; but equally they are proud to belong to a tradition founded, it is said, on the testimony of Thomas whose own encounter with Christ counts for all of them. The pilgrims are reminded of Jesus' response to Thomas, "blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed" (John 20:29).

It is perhaps the Sivagiri pilgrimage which most clearly exemplifies imitation of the revered holy figure. The pilgrims wear yellow robes as Sri Narayana Guru did. They travel long distances on foot, during which they sing devotional songs and attempt to spread the teachings, as the Guru did. During this time they practise abstinence from alcohol, sex and meat and visit important sites associated with the Guru's life. The pilgrimage is quite explicitly publicized as an instructional process in which participants are enabled to put into practice the Guru's teachings and emulate his endeavours.

The possibility of imitation and mutual influence also extends across pilgrimage traditions. Some people are eclectic in their choice of events so that they can transfer attitudes and behaviours from one pilgrimage to another. Furthermore, there is widespread discussion of the famous pilgrimages in general public discourse, so that many people are aware of the salient characteristics of other traditions even if they do not participate in them. Sivagiri pilgrims are aware that the event mimics, in some respects, the Sabarimala journey. Both feature parties of pilgrims who dress alike in their coloured garb, and both practise abstinence and purity of thought, the preparatory *vratam*, thereby emulating the saint and deity of their respective destinations.



Rajan commented that "all pilgrimage should be a taking up of one's cross, like Jesus", a process which is literally enacted at Malayattur, but, by extension, can be said to comprise the appropriate spiritual process, an imitation of the heart, in performing the Jacobite pilgrimages. Thankachan, significantly, commented that the Manjinikara journey and other Jacobite pilgrimages must have drawn their inspiration, in part, from the Sabarimala cult. The possibility of mutual influence amongst pilgrims of different traditions, whether conveyed by direct observation of the activities of friends or neighbours or more distantly through the media and other publicity, is one of the main reasons why it is important to appreciate the range of pilgrimages which are found across the Kerala religious landscape, and view them comparatively.

Within any particular pilgrimage journey it is reasonable to suppose that social learning occurs in each of the various ways explored by Bandura - modelling, tuition, social persuasion. "Modelling", in turn, will take a range of forms, - from spontaneous mimicry to deliberate observation and imitation. It is certainly the case that many pilgrims are proud to come to be regarded as very experienced, "model" pilgrims. Avirachan was pleased to show me the certificate with which he has been honoured for his committed and persistent participation in the Manjinikara journey. There is some prestige attached to becoming an influential *guruswami* or pilgrim leader whose performance can be copied and who can share knowledge concerning performance of rituals, or about the history and traditions of the event. An increased interest in modelling the behaviour of other experienced pilgrims, as well as that of the saint or deity, and then passing skills on to others, probably accounts for the increased seriousness with which many view their pilgrimages over successive years. Prasad and Vishnu, for example, have both become more "traditionalist" in their undertaking of the Sabarimala pilgrimage.

The importance for human performance of spontaneous mimicry and the associated "contagiousness" of many psychological states, emotions in particular, has been explored by Elaine Hatfield and colleagues (Hatfield, Cacioppo and Rapson 1994). The process of psychological contagion is likely to ensure that powerful processes are induced amongst individuals within the social context of pilgrimage regardless of whether they consciously regard other pilgrims as models or leaders. These processes can go on to have a lasting effect, achieving the sort of impact upon memory and emotion which will be carried home. Furthermore, the size of the crowds walking to Manjinikara, the clamour of devotees struggling to take darshan at Sabarimala, create situations in which one's own arousal and one's observation of the

emotions of others reinforce each other. In such a state of excitement, participants may experience a strong vicarious response to behaviours in which they are not actually participating, such as rolling around the shrine at Sabarimala or crawling to the church at Kothamangalam.

The phenomena of general arousal, emotional contagion and vicarious response may create the impression of enhanced bonding between fellow pilgrims of the kind which Turner posited with his ideas about "communitas". But by no means all shared states of arousal or emotional contagion facilitate significant bonding - it does not seem likely amid the jostling and pushing of the crowds at Sabarimala, for example. It seems to me that pilgrimage is most likely to strengthen bonds which are already well established; we have considered relationships of this kind. I am not convinced that pilgrimage is intrinsically more likely to strengthen social bonds than many more relaxed forms of shared activity - consider, for example, Keith Ridler's walks in the Alps with neighbours in an Italian village (in Jackson 1996:238).

#### (ii) Sharing the Message

Some of the pilgrimages, it has been noted, are carefully orchestrated to ensure that a particular message gets across to participants and to the wider world. This is notable for the Jacobite pilgrimages given the importance of these occasions in rallying the faithful in the context of the Church dispute. At Manjnikara and other Jacobite centres, speeches are made concerning Church affairs, as well as significant aspects of Church history. Appeals are made for efforts to improve educational, Sunday School and youth facilities. A similar pattern is found at Sivagiri where participants are instructed concerning the aims of the pilgrimage and the Guru's teachings. There are lectures and singing sessions which expound on spiritual, technical and artistic themes. There are speeches on social issues, which seem to readily strike a chord with the politically informed populace of Kerala, as the disillusioned Marxist, turned keen Sri Narayana devotee, explained to me. There is social learning through explicit instruction and exhortation.

The pilgrimages are surrounded, of course, by oral traditions, anecdotes, stories and recollections, which are propagated informally. These are supplemented by widely distributed pamphlets, cassettes and posters. The recounting of stories about miracles, spiritual experiences, accidents, clashes and other incidents help to maintain participants' expectations of what pilgrimage ought to be like. The fear of wild animals whilst walking to Sabarimala is keenly felt by some, though encountering anything larger than a leech is unlikely. The passing on of anecdotes

also permits the speaker to reflect on his or her own experiences, adding insights and evaluations. The oral tradition can come to convey some of the range of needs and expectations which are brought to bear upon pilgrimage, from the most mundane problem to the most lofty spiritual concern. These cover the whole range of the human "hierarchy of needs", to use a phrase of Abraham Maslow (Maslow 1970), as one friend commented to me. Informal conversation, sharing remarks and stories, is one of the most important means by which people learn what to expect from pilgrimage, what benefits there may be and what it all means.

In considering the pilgrims' tales which circulate and establish expectations concerning miracles, blessings and other notable experiences, we are of course returning to the domain of narrative which was briefly explored in the previous chapter. It is worth emphasising again Gadamer's insight that the meanings of events, and narratives, are constantly drawn out and elaborated through dialogical exchange. We are now in a position to emphasise the multiple kinds of dialogue which could be pointed to here - with self and imaginal others (so-called cognitive performances), with fellow pilgrims, with family at home, religious specialists and with other circulated texts such as newspapers and pamphlets. Any description which a pilgrim provides of personal experiences is likely to be complexly influenced in all of these ways. The process of narration is saturated with meaning and motive, as are all human activities, and so affected by the pragmatics of recalling and retelling stories to particular listeners, in particular contexts with particular objectives.

Whilst the above considerations about the elaboration of meaning in the production of narrative, especially through dialogical exchange, are important, we should not allow this to lure us into the trap of a neo-idealism which can be the result of a naive response to such comments. It would be against the spirit of phenomenology to hypostatise the notions of "narrative" or "discourse" to the point where we insist that all meaning emerges from the mutual interaction of these putative cultural atoms with little space for the individual. This is a point of view which is sustained, in part, by the supposition that since any individual's thoughts and experiences must be communicated by means of socially sanctioned signifiers, it follows that the meanings conveyed must be a function of cultural convention which somehow bypasses the uniqueness of individual experience. But this problem is regarded by phenomenology not as an absolute and insurmountable barrier, but rather as a symptom of a tendency - the fact that there will be degrees of success in communication concerning the meanings and experiential phenomena in which we

are interested. The conventional character of signifiers does not preclude access to "real" experience, but it requires that we work at it. In many cases we are concerned with comparatively simple matters of fact; A has a headache, B is worried about his child, C noticed a particular church and so forth. Here, there may be issues of sincerity and honesty but a comprehension of the practical significance of such matters is usually all that is required to constitute a full understanding.

(iii) Social learning, language and habitus.

We can point to the nature of social learning as one of the guarantors both of shared meaning and the communication of experience. Linguistic communication, and expressive behaviour more generally, are subject to the same processes of imitation, spontaneous mimicry and psychological contagion as are other components of the human behavioural repertoire. By being conditioned by the full range of such influences, the subject can be said to acquire a habitus. That is to say, an individual acquires competence in a sphere of human activity by attunement to the language-games, perceptions, cognitions and emotions which constitute it. The acquisition of a habitus, and participation in the appropriate language-games, can be said to be based upon the biological fact of the possibility of shared meaning. And this is "meaning" in its full phenomenological sense, not just referential meaning, but also allusion and resonance. Language should not be dualistically considered to stand apart from experience. It is embedded in the flow of life, helps to constitute experience and forms part of the embodied competence of the social self. It is only if we impose preconsidered abstraction upon our conception of language and the meanings which it can be used to convey that we become trapped in scepticism or idealism, and might be defeatist about the phenomenological project<sup>18</sup>.

In attempting to understand the phenomena contained within a cultural practice, the participant-observer necessarily struggles to gain familiarity with the language-games structuring the process, as well as relevant facts about the personal histories and attitudes of key informants. However, since, as I have argued, pilgrimage is itself a social learning process (although containing within it plenty of scope for improvisation and spontaneity) there is a certain resemblance between the process of conditioning and self-immersion which must be undergone by the interested outsider, on the one hand, and the learning process of the fledgling pilgrim on the other. At any rate, it would be a mistake to suppose that orientation within the language games,

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<sup>18</sup> Kapferer (1986) presents a somewhat similar argument with regard to Sinhala exorcism rituals, within which performance, he says, achieves the "structuring of meaning and experience".

attunement to the relevant perceptions and emotions, is something which someone either possesses or lacks. It is a matter of degree.

A consequence of the above argument is that a semiotic approach to understanding pilgrimage (or other practices) does not stand in opposition to a phenomenological approach. Instead, we can say that whilst it is a fact that the journey motif is an established, conventional symbol in the religious discourse of many traditions, permitting a certain range of figurative improvisations within a discourse (a semiotic point), it is also the case that journeys are intrinsically well-suited to the emanation of, and encounter with, a diverse array or experiential meanings (a phenomenological point). Furthermore, there is no criterion for when such meaning has been exhaustively grasped and mastered. There will always be matters which can be explored here, however far we push either semiotic or phenomenological enquiry.

There can, therefore, be no simple answer to the question: "What are the meanings of pilgrimage and how are they disclosed?" The meanings are contained within narratives and lived experiences, in symbols and in human perceptions and emotions and imaginings. Pilgrimage is both a metaphor for life and a part of life. It contains anxieties, hopes, pains and social encounters. The experiences are themselves signs, in some respects, as well are portions of the basic fabric of life. It is the claim of this section that the phenomenological approach is especially worth exploring because it can investigate how symbolic traditions and practices engage with experience, and how the whole process becomes embedded in the flow of life.

## Summary of Chapter eight

Chapter eight pursues some of the themes raised by the phenomenological material of the previous chapter. The discussion is guided by ideas from the work of Merleau-Ponty which are expressed as three propositions. These draw attention, firstly, to the omnipresence of meaning, in a broad sense, in human life; secondly to the fact that the self is always engaged in a thoroughly bodily manner with the world and always possesses a particular history; and thirdly to the fact that the self engages in many activities of a "covert" nature for which observation alone provide insufficient information, first-person reports are required as well.

The perceptual processes in which a pilgrim becomes immersed are discussed, with emphasis upon attunement to the sights and sounds of pilgrimage, and the possibility of encountering new meanings and aspects. Sensations experienced within pilgrimage are discussed, particularly pain and the manner in which it might be affected by anxiety and the emotional character of pilgrimage. The so-called cognitive processes, remembering and imagining are also shown to be important, retrieving significant memories and facilitating a sense of encounter with divinity. Pilgrimage is a fairly structured means by which such experiences can be encouraged, although it is less structured than guided healing sessions. Some pilgrims may attain a sense of surrendering control, especially if they are struggling with intractable problems, especially health difficulties. Imagination plays a particular role in the development of imaginal dialogue, which can be important in relationships with either divine or flesh and blood individuals.

Various types of relationship, with saint or deity, with spouse or other family members, can be affected by pilgrimage. There can be a sense of sharing the burden of problems by undertaking pilgrimage. There are sometimes sexual motifs associated with pilgrimage cults; this usually concerns undertaking temporary celibacy. Some pilgrims welcome an opportunity to be away from their families whilst on pilgrimage. For some, it provides an opportunity to face up to a drinking problem.

Pilgrimages are social learning experiences. Such learning is achieved, in particular, by imitation, either deliberate or spontaneous, of both saint/deity and other pilgrims. In addition, participants are often educated about the significance of the pilgrimage and the message which it is supposed to convey. They frequently hear narratives describing notable incidents which suggest what it should all mean to the pilgrims. The fact of social learning can be said to underpin the possibility of shared meanings

within language-games in general as well as in specific contexts such as pilgrimage. The possibility of sharing meaning in a way which can illuminate different people's experiences underlies the phenomenological investigation. It can powerfully extend other approaches to understanding the meanings within cultural performances such as pilgrimage.

## Conclusion and Future Directions.

I was a stranger, and ye took me in

Matthew 25:35 (King James Version)

There may be no final destination, but it would, at least, be appropriate to look back to consider the main features of the landscape through which we have travelled. At the outset, it was emphasised that a two-pronged approach to the study of pilgrimage is desirable, permitting an exploration of both sociological and phenomenological aspects of the journeying process. A brief review of Kerala's history in the twentieth century showed that there have been profound social transformations which have been encouraged by religious reform movements and political activism. These have stimulated both Christian Churches and Hindu castes to organise and become assertive in conveying their own sense of identity and interests to the wider society. In particular, pilgrimage journeys have come to acquire some of the characteristics of campaigning marches and have been effective in getting a social message across.

The acquisition of features of the campaigning march or *jatha* has been especially evident for community pilgrimages which are dominated by one particular denomination or caste. These are walking journeys which are carefully organised, and which propagate a message on behalf of their community both to onlookers and, through publicity, to the wider society.

These are category one pilgrimages. They also provide an opportunity for participants to feel that they are engaged in a spiritually meritorious activity, from which they may benefit in quite practical ways through blessings from the saint or deity. Jacobite Christians and, in some contexts, Izhava Hindus are notably enthusiastic organisers of such pilgrimages in Central Kerala.

There are other pilgrimage journeys in Central Kerala which are extremely popular and influential, with symbolically elaborated ritual journeys, but which are not dominated by any one caste or denomination. They have a broad appeal which stretches across different castes, Churches and religions. Consequently, they cannot readily draw attention to a cause or interest associated with a specific community. These are category two pilgrimages. For most participants, the emphasis is entirely on the benefits - both spiritual and this-worldly - which may be gained from the journey. Pilgrimages of this type are organised differently from those of category one. Local groups within towns and villages make their own arrangements for the journey; routes, timings and stops are not usually pre-planned by official organisers.



Sabarimala and Malayattur are the principal category two pilgrimage sites in Central Kerala.

Many pilgrim centres are not associated with an elaborated journeying process. Visitors may travel some distance in order to participate in vigils or festivals or to make their own private offering, but it is not important how they get there. Such sites can be grouped together as category three pilgrim centres.

Holy places in any of the three categories can become a focus of dispute and may become embroiled in political controversy. Complaints are frequently heard about the "modernisation" or over-development of category two sites and the possibility that their character will be spoiled, with the seriousness of the journeying process thereby undermined. This is relatively less likely for category one destinations because, if they are strongly associated with one community, it may be easier to achieve a consensus on how the site should be managed. Nonetheless, dispute is still possible. The creation (or revival) of pilgrim centres is a potentially divisive process, especially if one group believes that its holy space is violated, as at Nilackal near Sabarimala. The importance of distinguishing category one, category two and category three pilgrimages, specifying their different characteristics and contrasting their socio-political dimensions is the first major conclusion of this study.

The possibility of disputes affecting, or being expressed by, pilgrimage activity appears to affirm the point of view of competing discourse theorists. In addition to this, however, some enhanced solidarity amongst Jacobites and Izhavas - perhaps the creation of "imagined community" - can be discerned in the category one pilgrimages. There is formation of friendships, light-hearted banter and enthusiastic engagement in communal singing during the journey. Especially notable is the number of non-pilgrims who offer refreshments and, when necessary, accommodation to the pilgrims. Jacobites take seriously the Biblical injunction quoted at the start of this section. These are significant processes of social engagement and integration, if not necessarily full *communitas*.

The Sabarimala pilgrimage is certainly surrounded by a rhetoric of normative *communitas* although the experience of existential *communitas* is not very apparent. For the most part, Sabarimala pilgrims stick to their own family and friends (as they do at Malayattur) and quickly become too tired for significant social interaction. All of them will be aware, however, that in principle members of all castes and religions are equal during the pilgrimage. We can say that both the competing discourse perspective and, with some qualifications, Turner's conjectures are useful for

understanding pilgrimage in Central Kerala. This is the second main conclusion of the thesis.

A phenomenological investigation of the experiences of pilgrims can reveal the range of meanings and transformative processes which affect individual participants. In order to understand this, it is appropriate firstly to attend to the pilgrimage process as experienced by the anthropologist, combining this with observation and proffered comments in order to infer the general characteristics of the experience as undergone by most participants. In addition to this, however, it is illuminating to consider the details of specific experiences, memories and motives of individual pilgrims. The latter usually have to be collected as retrospective narratives. This means that care is needed in their interpretation. However, this approach points to the fact that pilgrimage is an important vehicle and inspiration for the production of narratives which can acquire importance for individuals, families and, at a more general level, for Church, caste or wider society. The value of pursuing investigation of this type is shown, it is hoped, in this work, and this can be pointed to as the third conclusion of the thesis.

Pilgrimages change, attune and educate the participants; in particular their perceptions, memories, knowledge and relationships, both with divinity and with other people, are affected. Participants acquire a pilgrim's skills or habitus. They may acquire a deepened sense of engagement with the saint or deity. This is achieved through "self-surrender" and through imitation, both of the holy figure and of other pilgrims. In addition, participants can gain renewed hope that they will be helped in facing the problems of life - unemployment, childbirth, illness, death. The diversity of ways in which participants are changed by the pilgrimage experience, as shown by the phenomenological enquiry, and the importance of this for them, is the fourth conclusion of the thesis.

In drawing the study to an end, it is worth pointing out some gaps and unexplored issues which could be given further attention in order to achieve a more complete picture of pilgrimage in Central Kerala.

There are some communities which have hardly featured in the discussion although they are present in the area; their practices and points of view could be studied. Neither Muslims nor members of the so-called Scheduled Tribes, for example, have been investigated. They are both involved, to varying degrees in the Sabarimala cult. Their own pilgrim centres would be worth investigating, both in their own right and

for comparative purposes. I am acquainted with one or two sites for each of these groups in the Central Kerala region.

Amongst both Hindus and Christians, there are sections which could receive greater attention, for example Brahmins, Nayars and Latin Catholics. Although none of these groups is associated with category one pilgrimages, to my knowledge, their practices and experiences in connection with category two or three pilgrim centres could be explored further.

Much more work is always possible on the history of the communities and traditions which have been discussed. In particular, for the present study it is regrettable that there seems to be a paucity of sources to illuminate the early history of Sabarimala and Malayattur. However, it is possible that if renewed efforts were made in this direction some progress could be made. Much more could be done on the history of the Jacobite pilgrim centres as well.

For a more complete understanding of popular Christian religiosity in Central Kerala, an important topic which should be addressed is the impact of the charismatic and pentecostalist movements. These have had some influence on all of the Christian Churches. The locations of retreats and worship sessions are sometimes referred to as "pilgrim centres". In addition, they often incorporate healing ministries through which physical, mental and spiritual ills are thought to be cured. They therefore comprise parallel and, in some respects, rival events to the pilgrimages discussed here. Furthermore, the experiences of participants during such occasions would comprise a topic which would be well suited to a phenomenological investigation.

The lives, attitudes and behaviour of "professionals" who are involved in pilgrimage could be explored more thoroughly. These could be the Christian priests who organise events, the *swamis* at Sivagiri or traders, beggars or bus drivers. To explore these matters carefully would require a different methodology with a different emphasis, more site-centred, than that of the present study. The information gathered would be useful and complementary; it could reveal, especially, the economic significance of pilgrimage activity.

Finally, the descriptions and interpretations of the present work could be presented to pilgrims for their own comments and reflections. The Jacobites, for example, are much interested in their own identity, history and theology and their feedback would probably be illuminating. Of course, many members of this and other communities have already made their own suggestions concerning themes which should be highlighted in the writing. They have also probed my own thoughts and opinions as

these have developed. In this way, the work is already the product of a fully dialogical enquiry.

A specific step towards encouraging discussion of representation and the process of seeking understanding was taken by me towards the end of my fieldwork period. I had made a video recording which followed the course of one of the Jacobite pilgrimages as it travelled from Karingachira to Kothamangalam. I was anxious to show this to some friends and fellow pilgrims and invite comments upon it. Unfortunately, this showing was repeatedly disrupted and postponed due to power cuts, clashes of appointments and other complications. In the end, I found myself arranging to show it at the house of a friend (he has a video player) not far from Karingachira on my last night in Kerala.

My final evening did not go according to plan. Once again there was a power cut. Following this, two very committed members of the audience, Varghese and Kurien, agreed to follow me back to Ernakulam so that we could view the video in a building which has its own electricity generator. This was only partly satisfactory; we saw parts of the video, but not very clearly. However, I presented a copy of it to my fellow pilgrims which they would keep at the diocesan office. We then said goodbye for the last time as I would be catching the train to Madras in the morning and flying back to Britain from there. Varghese then made a point of saying to me that every time he journeyed to Manjinikara, thenceforth, he would remember to say a prayer for me to the Bawa; this pleased me very much.

## Addendum

Diptych (Great Intercession for the Departed Spiritual Fathers of the Church)

*Barekmore* (Lord with us). Again we remember those who have before us fallen asleep in holiness and taken repose in the abode of the saints and who maintained and delivered and entrusted to us the one apostolic and uncorrupt faith ..... (follows the names of early saints of the Church) ..... Patriarch Moran Mar Ignatius Elias III, Maphrian Mar Basilios Eldho and Mar Gregorios and those before them, and with them, and after them, who have kept and handed down and entrusted to us the one genuine and undefiled faith. May their prayers be a stronghold to us. Let us beseech the Lord.

*Kurielaison* (Lord have mercy).

During the Jacobite celebration of the mass this prayer is always said immediately following the consecration of the bread and wine. It remembers (in addition to the early saints) the Prelates buried at Manjinikara, Kothamangalam and Parumala respectively.

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